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Panel discussion: Civil society and political institutions

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Belgrade, 31th March 2007

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start by expressing my thanks. A little more than half a year ago, in Bulgaria, in the town of Russe we organized a meeting of the participants in the project “The role of culture in the structural development of South Eastern Europe”. We then made a promise that this talk will be continued and that it would involve not only the civil sector but also active politicians from the region and MEPs from the European Parliament. Today this meeting is a fact and it is all too natural that we should talk about the interaction between civil society and the political institutions. I would therefore like to specifically thank my colleagues from the Board of the Berlin Conference as well as the civil organization that had the will power to keep their promise and prepare the present forum.

I am glad that this time the event is hosted by Belgrade. Here it makes all the more difference to talk about the role of the civil sector in the establishment of democratic procedures and we could also remind ourselves what we need to avoid if we want to live in a world that respects the other and gives the right to everybody to defend their stance and have representation.

And thus not become compelled to write what once a graffiti read: *I trade a life for a used automobile.*

It is a well known fact that present day democracy entails a kind of multi-authority in which the civil society and the political institutions are partners. Despite the existing disputes about whether it is possible or not for people as a whole to participate in the government and despite the strong insistence on transparency, the debates, social inclusion, the idea of representations continues to be important. The modern democracy is an “empty space” according to the formulation of Claude Lefort, an abstract space of power which does not coincide with any concrete individual, a space for clear representation. Yet the 21st century is conscious of the fact that representation has been the reason for many citizens to become structurally deprived of participation in the everyday decision-making process and that such precedents should be brought down to a minimum.

One thing is certain. Democracy is a process and the political results are always due to an exchange. This exchange is different. This is an exchange between MPs and voters, between citizens and the local authority, between institutions and the civil sector.

This is an exchange between we and them, whose aim is to erase borders, to neutralize the talk about the elites and the citizens. The political project is shaped upon the very idea of negotiation and compromise between the groups. Democracy could be sustained only if the public sphere exists. Therefore, citizenship should be viewed as a regulatory idea. As an integration tool it presupposes a general adoption of the political as a basis for unity, as a consensus with regards to regulating conflicts of all kinds.

A part of this tendency for integrity through citizenship is the so called Plan D of the EC, which provides for increasing the trust of the European citizens in the European institutions, for greater inclusion in initiatives of the kind of Citizens for Europe – so that there is actual participation of the citizens in the formation of opinions on important international and European policies’ issues that will be consolidated in the establishment of institutional policies. This type of inclusion increases transparency too and I will say that we are headed towards making policies of actual participation and towards the enforcement of a form of a more direct democracy.

“A Soul for Europe ” is one more such civil initiative and it demonstrates how through civil projects, through initiatives at the basis of which are cultural policies we could aspire to achieving social and economic effects. Let me not use just bare words and give you an example from the Bulgarian practice – the participants in the cultural families of Bulgaria – this is a union of NGOs that deal with cultural policies- only for the past half year managed to carry out support campaigns in many cities and to impose the idea for the creation of municipal cultural funds. They also managed to demonstrate that culture just like education could also be at the basis of greater economic freedom and prosperity, more jobs and higher standards.

It is hardly suitable to talk only about communities in front of all the artists that are present here today. Because the temptation to work in solitude is great. And it is even stronger in our countries that have experienced totalitarianism and where we know how hard it is to overcome the automatization of the environment. Yet modernity requires team work. I would therefore say that the interaction between the civil society and the political institutions needs to be like team work. With clear valencies for connection. I will repeat once again, individuality is highly important. As a liberal I consider the respect for individuality a principle of vital significance.

At the same time we need to learn to work with the idea that beyond the talent and originality, there is the group of the average people, in the best sense of the word. And that the present-day democratic mindset should be above all geared towards their interrelations. Because this type of team work also guarantees a going above and beyond our personal best as well as quality improvements if I am to cite one of my favourite literary heroes – Hans Castorp of the “Magic Mountain” by Thomas Mann.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have gathered together to discuss the role of cultural policies and the possibility to search for a social and an economic effect of their implementation. In other words, we have gathered together to talk about how the integration of the policies could make EU more successful and more prosperous. Because this is where our future lies – in the relations that I started with, in the mutual understandings, in the integration approach. And I will give one more example, this time connected to the problematic that is my present domain as a member of the EC – Consumers policy.

I think that we have all reason to view the citizen as a consumer of public services, of culture. Because consumption today does not entail the mere use of goods, the consumer society is not consumerist in the sense that 19th and even 20th century philosophers saw it. The consumer society is active and it considers itself as being an active and a rational participant. Have you ever thought for example how much activism is triggered by means of the internet blogs, how many civil campaigns have stemmed from them. And how at times it is this agreement on an issue connected to consumption – no matter if it is good or bad practices – triggers civil actions. Thus civil policies are born while people are on the move.

I focus upon this because it is very important to me that we start seeing the modus of consumer activity as a civil one. This is a liberal idea and its goal is to demonstrate that the administration, culture and even politics are all determined by the market, by consumption, by competition. In brief, the more the consumer sees him/herself as a civil consumer the more

we could talk about quality of life and competitiveness. Because consumption today is a significant form of work and the social discipline of the imagination is its essence.

You could of course oppose me by saying that the social groups that increase and stabilize their economic, educational and social status are indeed the kernel of the stable party formations and that they are the ones that outline the classical European political system. Allow me to disagree.

The contemporary models of consumption create communities that are ever better differentiated, that are grouped together and act in accordance with their specific type of living rather than the general economic and political indicators. This inevitably influences the models of political thinking and participation that become more and more detached from the traditional parties that are based upon classical ideological divisions. Thus the need for representation based upon the solution of strictly defined issues increases. This in turn allows the creation not only of dynamic structures of civil pressure but also of local civil groups, wholly related to regional policies. Or if I may cite Ulrich Beck: The essence of present-day politics is in the ability for self-organization. And it all starts from everyday activities: from school issues, lodging problems, road traffic rules. Today all kinds of groups counteract the state. And this is precisely what makes our present initiative a sensible one.

Thank you for the attention.