

10th anniversary SWG ministerial conference
Montenegro

Hannes Lorenzen European Parliament

Excellencies, dear ministers, colleagues and friends,

Thank you for inviting me again to join you at a ministerial conference in the Western Balkans.

Congratulations to SWG for celebrating its 10th anniversary. This is a very important sign of stability of a constructive dialogue between governments in the region, especially in times of growing insecurities in Europe and in the European Union.

SWG together with your ministries is giving us an example of constructive cooperation beyond national borders, as a region of common cultures and histories. By working closely together you remind us of what we have promised: to encourage and help you in joining the European Union with all its opportunities as well as its shared responsibilities and with the perspective to carry with us the common principles of democracy, solidarity, and cohesion.

I am speaking to you today as civil servant of the European Institutions and as European citizen. Engaged in various civil society networks.

This anniversary of 10 years of SWG's successful work in the Western Balkans reminds me of my early days of Pan European civil society networking in rural development back in 1999.

The European Parliament had taken the initiative to visit the Baltic Region in order to better understand what was going on in rural regions of the accession candidate countries and what kind of policy would be needed to help people in rural areas to get involved in shaping their own future in the countryside.

With support of the European Commission and national and regional government bodies we organized what we called a **“traveling workshop”** in Estonia and Sweden. Kaj Mortensen who is today your advisor in the Western Balkans was participating in that workshop. At that time he was head of the pre-accession program SAPARD at the European Commission.

The idea of traveling and learning from people where they live was kind of revolutionary. It was an excursion, an adventure. We brought together people who normally never meet: farmers, teachers, rural entrepreneurs, people from rural and regional administration, national ministries and the European institutions. We visited projects and majors, markets and rural tourism sites. We discussed with our hosts what kind of problems we had seen and which solutions we could imagine. We even went further: instead of just recommending something, some of us engaged in concrete commitments to help with training, fundraising or improving communication when the workshop was over.

Traveling and collective learning was like jumping out of daily routines, leaving the usual “silo thinking” behind and getting close to what people need and can do on their own.

I am mentioning this experience back in 1999, because this informal gathering to discover rural problems and potentials is powerful. It has become a tool of civil society creating common space for people from administration and government and to build trust between them, something that is so

urgently needed these days in a weakened European Union.

Out of this first traveling workshop emerged a network of informal civil society networks which called itself PREPARE – Partnership for rural Europe,- which has since organized many of such workshops, exchange of good practices in rural development, training in local projects and much more.

Three years ago we organized a travelling workshop here, in Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, with support of the Taiex service of the European Commission and your governments. The report was published by the European Commission and is available on the SWG website.

PREPARE now embraces 18 national rural networks, including most recently the network of Albania. I am grateful to minister Edmond Panariti that he has supported this network recently. And just three weeks ago we organized another workshop of this kind in the Black Sea region, in Georgia and Armenia to prepare another project of cooperation and trust building between civil society and governments around the Black Sea.

I am underling the aspect of **trust building** again – within the various stakeholders in civil society, entrepreneurs, NGOs, rural local governments and administrations, - because it is key to success in stabilizing rural societies.

We all know the key problems: missing physical and educational infrastructure; low investments; outmigration of young people; restricted markets. We have seen how important it was in the Baltic region that rural initiatives were recognized and trained as partners of governments and not treated simply as receivers of state planning or aid.

Today one of the rural movements in Estonia, KODUKANT has become an important partner of government in running rural development projects. Even more, the national rural fora or organizations which are partners of PREPARE throughout the new member states or neighbor countries are supporting each other in capacity building and networking in rural development. It is this trust building and practical solidarity which brings Europeans together.

We should create more opportunities for people to meet and work together like that.

So - what can we do in the Western Balkans, in the European Union and its neighbor countries to strengthen civil society and governments in their efforts to develop their regions and encourage their people?

I will start with the European Institutions, as I am part of it, working in the European Parliament.

I believe that in times of the various sorts of “exits”, which some politicians and governments have offered their people as a way out – out of growing worries and fears of the future, of losing their job, of being marginalized in the process of globalization - we need people to be supported in re-discovering trust in their own capacities and in making democracy work for themselves.

For the Western Balkans this would first mean that we Western Europeans should highlight the achievements already made in so many parts of your regions and people’s day to day lives so that they can be proud of themselves. We should look at the bright side of the process instead of repeating how much is still missing to reach the so-called “aquis communautaire”.

Secondly, the EU should show must more trust in civil society initiatives which appear in smaller scales and from the bottom-up. Monitoring Committees of stakeholders are a good means to create space for dialogue with governments. But there should be many more opportunities created for people to meet and to create their entrepreneurial start ups or local partnerships, such as the LEADER or CLLD approach, but also programs like “people to people” and

Trust building is - **thirdly** - also important by making EU funds available and manageable through the right instruments. Too much money offered through accession programs is available but cannot be absorbed because the rules are not sufficiently adapted to the capacities of administrations – and vice versa, - training of administrations is not adapted to the needs of people and of donors.

Both sides – the EU and receiving countries must make much harder efforts to match fund management and investments needed.

Forth, it is important that our neighbors and accession countries feel welcome in the EU and included in our reflexions about our common future.

When we gather, like at the **CORK 2 conference** which took place in September this year to debate and plan the future of rural development in the EU after 2020 – our neighbors should be invited and included in these debates.

The same is true for the upcoming discussions about the future of the **Common Agriculture Policy**, the inclusion of the **Sustainable Development Goals** of the United Nations in more integrated European policies, or the **protein plan of the Union** – where the Western Balkan region could play a key role.

I would even dare to think, that a new EU regulation on organic farming, in which I am currently involved, should include our neighbors in our debates. This region offers great opportunities for highly diversified value chains and very tasty food.

Finally it is important to **reinvent democracy**.

It seems to me that many people have a growing fear of freedom and democracy. They look for simple solutions to a complicated word. And they prefer people who express these fears and assure to protect them against the world out there.

There is a remedy against these fears. An expression of trust in them and in collective solutions. In our field of work, in rural regions, one example is the movement of rural parliaments which were invented in the Nordic Countries of Europe and which have now appeared also in many new member states and neighbor countries of the EU. There is even a European Rural Parliament now since three years and I would like to quote from the resolution of the last gathering in Austria last year concerning the Western Balkans:

Rural communities and economies in the Western Balkans and South East Europe countries are deeply affected by the political instability in the region. The process of accession to the EU is on hold. This slows up the process of political reform. Rural development is seen by governments as a low priority. We urge the EU to revitalise the accession process in this region, including much more effective support to rural development processes.

I would like to end, encouraging you to look into these opportunities to revitalize the creativity, the self esteem and the confidence of people to shape their own future and to work with their governments on common ground: the respect of each others interests and preferences and of our common values : democracy, solidarity and cohesion.

Thank you for your attention