

BALKAN TRAILS OF PEACE

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to draw your attention to the inception and the implementation of an idea for restructuring economic development in the post-war region of the Balkans in Europe, that its initiators called Trails of Peace. It is an idea born in the Sessions of the Balkan Youth Reconciliation Seminar Series, organized in 2000-2001 by Friendship Ambassadors Foundation – the organization that I represent at this Conference. We in Friendship Ambassadors believe it is an idea having a great potential for bringing economic motivation behind the peace efforts of so many stakeholders in the Balkan crises.

What argument led to the birth of this idea?

Recent historical evidence shows that contemporary war conflicts burst out in regions of underdevelopment, and no matter what ideological camouflage the parties engaged may put on they are always fighting, among other things and very often above all, for the control, distribution and consumption of the slender economic resources at hand. The latter are often, more or less of a criminal character, which further complicates the situation.

Such is the case with the series of Balkan crises. Some people may classify them as being ethnic, religious, ideological, but we are convinced that they are economic in the deeper motivation of the warring sides. Why do these sides want more land, control over towns and cities (with their plants and factories, trade and infrastructure) but to have access to larger economic resources at the expense of the other side's limitation?

If we agree that economic motives deeply move the warring sides, then we should look for economic remedies to the deep causes of war. Should only 1% of the billions of dollars that the USA and NATO spent on bombing Yugoslavia had been invested in business projects in the region after the start of changes in Eastern Europe, maybe it would have never come to the situation of war. This 1% has not come to the region yet, despite the big words and loud promises by American and European politicians after the war. Thus the deep reason for war – poverty - remains. Rich people, who have lots to lose in a war do not want to fight, it is only the poor, who have nothing to lose that are going to war, with the hope of conquering something, no matter how small, for themselves in it.

After all the above reasoning, we came to the conclusion that something, no matter how small compared to the disaster of the region, must be done in that direction, and it should be started by us, living in the region. Or, as the character of the famous Russian comic writers Ilf and Petrov says: "The cause for saving the drowning is in the hands of the drowning themselves."

The Trails of Peace are to replace the Path of War across the previously warring territories of intermingled Balkan national majorities and minorities. These are tourist itineraries, illuminating the natural and man-made beauties of the neighboring countries, their similarities and differences, their common history and their uniqueness. Tourists in these groups (initially American, Western European, Japanese) will go to destinations in at least two, preferably three countries, and come to know the different peoples and eventually see that they are not so different after all as to go and kill each other. The focus of interest will be on experience and getting close with the locals. These local people, who will meet and serve the guests will themselves be constantly in contact over

the old and new borders, because this is required if their common business is to be successful. They will also have to know more about each other, in order to be able to help foreign guests compare what they see. And this common, inter-Balkan business will bring hard currency to all parties engaged in the Project. We very much rely on the young participants in the Youth Seminar Series to be the local motors of this project – they already have the way of thinking that is needed to bring it to a successful realization.

As you can see, this was just an idea. My role in the Project, as a businessman, was to put some common sense, or you may call it economic logic, in it so that it became realizable. That meant no more, and no less than to make a commercial product out of the idea. Because if you want to sell anything, even an idea, you have to make it into a product – with defined benefits, costs and price.

How did we proceed?

I compiled a rather comprehensive questionnaire covering all aspects of a destination in the region (that is a place where tourists might be interested to go). I sent this questionnaire to the participants in the Balkan Youth Reconciliation Seminar Series and they brought the answers back with them to the last Session in Timisoara, Romania. There we discussed the questions and answers, divided in several groups, each organized around a leading question.

First. What is there to see and experience? We put the accent on the experience, on the living culture, not on the dead remnants of the past, without ignoring them, of course. The exposure of the material heritage of the region is subject to a larger academic project of the local committees of ICOMOS, UNESCO's cultural heritage section, led by Prof. Hristov from Bulgaria, that received much acclaim and awards in Europe last year. We, however, insist on experiencing local festivals, living crafts, daily life habits, local food and drink, the religious rituals and festivities, because this is what the big international touroperators do not offer to their customers. These will be our major competitive advantage – the mere scale of their operations does not allow such a focus. And on the other hand, these aspects of culture are exactly what the region of the Balkans is incredibly rich in.

The Second set of questions are grouped around this major one: How can the above aspects of the destination (already described in detail) be shown to the tourists? Are they commercially processed and exposed? If yes, to what extent? What is more to be done to suit our purposes? Is there a will in the local community to do that? And who exactly will do it? What will all that cost? And a breakdown of costs. What help do the locals need in this respect – from us, from the local and state authorities, from investors?

The Third set of questions addresses the actual contacts on the spot – the parties interested or already involved, the parties on which one or another solution depends, their physical representatives and all contact details. This is very important because my experience has taught me that in such cases it is much more valuable to have just one person really devoted, than the abstract agreement of all the local authorities with no personal commitment by any one of them (as is often the case).

Fourth is the Tourist infrastructure – hotels, restaurants, transportation, etc. – their availability and category. For rich tourists might be willing to sweat all day climbing up

and down the mountains to see a famous cloister or taking part in a local festival of folk music and dance, but in the evening they will demand a warm bath, a healthy meal and clean linen to get into. If you do not provide them with these you may surely consider the whole day a failure.

All sorts of unexpected problems arise in this respect. Thus, for example, we planned a very attractive tour from Ljubljana, in Slovenia, down the Dalmatian coast in Croatia and finishing in Tirana, the capital of Albania, most of the travel to be by boat. But is there a regular boat service from the historic southern town of Dubrovnik to Dürres, near Tirana – no, there isn't. So we have to make the distance by coach, but that means crossing twice the Montenegrin and Serbian borders in addition to the Croatian and Albanian ones – you can imagine what an experience that will be when you know that the four countries are all hostile to one another. So, what to do? Give up Albania? What shall the difference of our itinerary be then from all other Dalmatian cruises already available? Or another example, it will be an unforgettable experience to take our group, which has started its tour from Albania, across the Ohrid Lake, on the border, to the historical and tourist area of Macedonia around the town of Ohrid. But is there a boat service across the lake – no. And the same problems arise again. These may seem purely technical issues, but believe me, they can ruin the whole project (and they have ruined a number of otherwise perfect projects that did not take them seriously).

Having the answers to the questions in the four groups above, we were able to make a kind of passport of each of the destinations. Then we could link the various destinations in a number of ways in separate itineraries – geographically, historically, religiously, musically, gastronomically, architecturally, choreographically, etc. – to serve our guiding idea (of which I talked at the beginning). A lot of other technical issues are to be taken into consideration on this stage, too, mostly nation of tourists specific. Like the length of annual vacations in each country (say, Germany versus Japan), so that we can plan the entire length of the tour, allowing for over-the-ocean flights (available or not in the first and last destinations), jet lag and the specific requirements of the group – as, for example, the Americans do not like long coach drives and would rather have some time of their own at a destination, while the Japanese want their whole time planned and guided. Things like that are well known in the sector and I just wanted to bring them to your attention, not to elaborate on them.

After this organizational and mental work had been done, 4 or 5 Trails (routes, itineraries – you may call them) emerged, crossing the Balkans East-to-West, North-to-South or along the diagonals.

Our efforts have reached this stage of the development of the Project. All the work so far has been done on a voluntary basis, without any financial support but what slender resources Friendship Ambassadors could put in to bring all the participants together – physically, during the 3 seminar sessions, and virtually – over the Internet.

What more is there to be done?

We have to form a team of 2-3 people that can go along the identified Trails and see how things planned can actually happen, how it all works on the spot, how do the local support and infrastructure actually perform, what are the actual costs, etc.? Because you

cannot take a group of tourists, more or less spoiled by the industry's standards, to these far from technically perfect tourist destinations, without experiencing the routes yourself. That much at least I have learned from creating similar itineraries in similar circumstances in my home country of Bulgaria for the last 12 years.

Then come the final planning, itinerary compilation and cost allocation - and here you have the tourist product ready.

At that time we shall need more investment – into advertising and marketing of the product, into familiarization tours for touroperator and tourist media people, etc.

And only after that we can start selling.

We, at Friendship Ambassadors, shall not be able to bring the Project to its successful completion with our own resources only. But having the attention of the world third sector that our Project is enjoying at this Conference makes us confident that we will manage to raise the funds needed.

Then we can help, with our ideas, experience and ready solutions, the Trails of Peace lead to other warring regions and bring them peace through prosperity, too.

Thank you for your kind attention, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Evgeni Vassilev