

High Representative's Speech to the Islamic Conference Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) Symposium in Mostar

If Mostar is a keystone for Bosnia & Herzegovina,

Can Bosnia & Herzegovina be a bridge for Europe?

There are, just occasionally in the life of countries, moments so imbued with political symbolism – so overtly laden with historical significance – that they come, in time, to encapsulate, more than the mere event they represent, to encapsulate an era.

The dismantling of the Berlin Wall.

The collapse of the 'twin towers' of the World Trade Centre.

The toppling of Saddam's statue.

Each an iconic image, indelibly stamped on our memories, forever frozen in our mind's eye.

In the context of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the deliberate destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, flashed around the world's television screens, was just such a moment.

A moment when all the wanton barbarism that accompanied Yugoslavia's violent collapse was crystallized in a single second, and preserved in the memory for generations.

Why?

Because no other event of those dreadful years so graphically illustrated the triumph of mindless aggression over the values of civilisation which that tragic war came to represent.

And no other moment provided such a stark demonstration of the moral and cultural bankruptcy of those on all sides, and of all ethnicities, who prosecuted that war at such terrible cost, and many of them have profited from it, politically and personally, ever since.

This bridge – like the cultural and religious coexistence it represents – took far longer to build, and indeed to re-build, than the microsecond that it took to destroy it.

Nevertheless, re-build it we have.

And now – tomorrow – we will have a new image, and a new message.

The Old Bridge 's destruction may have represented the momentary triumph of evil. But its reconstruction represents a permanent triumph of will – the will to do whatever is necessary to ensure the ultimate victory of civilisation over primitivism.

Tomorrow, this ancient, miraculous arc of stone will once again span the river below and join the two sides of this great city.

I can think of no more significant moment for BiH since the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation began almost nine years ago with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

No clearer act available to us at the moment of closure on the past.

No more powerful statement of confidence in the future.

For, in re-opening this bridge, we signal our resolve to re-establish the tradition of multi-confessional, multi-national co-existence that, contrary to common misperceptions, held around the world, has characterised life in this part of the world for most of the last five hundred years.

Like the bridge itself, this tradition has held firm more often than it has given way.

The fact is that in the almost 500 years since the Mostar Bridge was first built, back in the time of Sulaiman the Magnificent, in 1566, intolerance and disharmony have been as much a feature of Western Europe as they have of the Western Balkans.

You see, there are some who would have you believe that the peoples of this region are, and always have been, consumed by a violent hatred of each other. I heard a British Foreign Secretary, seeking to justify non-intervention in 1993, make just this case.

But actually we in Western Europe have seen more wars – and incalculably more deaths from war – in those five hundred years than have the countries of the Balkans.

Why do I make this comparison?

Not to diminish the shortcomings of Ottoman rule – or even be it in the Austrian rule, which, particularly in its dying days, was too often arbitrary and cruel.

Nor to downplay the savagery of the Balkan wars of the twentieth century nor to absolve those so-called 'romantic nationalists' who pursued the illusion of national exclusivity and ethnic uniformity that fuelled those conflicts and, which, time and again, set this beautiful region ablaze.

My purpose in making this comparison is to put the most recent Balkan conflicts in their rightful historical context and to

remind us that when those fratricidal struggles came, they did so only rarely as a consequence of ancient enmities. More often it was, as the consequence, the wider struggles between Europe's Great Powers that ripped through the demographic patchwork quilt that is the Balkans.

And that is what was so shocking about the wars of the 1990s – that they represented a return to that earlier model of atavistic nationalism just when the rest of Europe had finally discovered the value of multi-ethnicity and diversity.

And here is the paradox. While the Balkans had been subjected to centuries of imperial rule, conversions and colonisation, the old imperial powers of the West had, from the 1950s on, been opening their doors to their onetime colonial subjects.

While the peoples of the Western Balkans fought in the 1990s to turn their ethnic diversity into national uniformity, the countries of Western Europe were abandoning their uniformity in favour of a new cultural pluralism.

And while the nations of the former Yugoslavia fought new wars over borders, real and hoped for – the countries of the European Union were actively dismantling the borders over which they had fought for the best part of 1000 years.

And the result is that the European Union is now the world's largest community of peaceful and prosperous democracies, and the world's biggest and wealthiest single market, all underpinned by the rule of law and strong protection of human and minority rights.

Most importantly, the European Union has become what the Irish politician and Nobel Peace Prize winner, John Hume, has rightly described as “the most successful conflict resolution mechanism in history”.

Take France and Germany .

War between them is now unthinkable, because the values they share – an unshakeable attachment to democracy, to an open and plural society, to the rule of law, and to freedom in economic life – are far stronger than anything that divides them.

The Europe that was once artificially divided by political ideology is now united by political values shared from the Baltic to the Bay of Biscay .

And one of the most important of those values is respect for pluralism and diversity.

For there is nothing that now defines a European Union of 25 member states so much as its national, religious and cultural diversity.

The key revelation of modern Europe is to see diversity not as a problem, but as an advantage.

To recognize that differences are there, not just to be tolerated, but to be celebrated.

To understand borders as anachronisms from the past, not sources of protection for the future.

This is the gift, I would agree, the priceless gift, that Europe can give this country and this region.

But this is not just a one-way relationship.

It is common practice to focus, especially in this country, on what Europe can bring to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

But rarely do we ask what Bosnia and Herzegovina can bring to Europe .

And here I return to the Mostar Bridge . For just as Mostar represents the keystone for Bosnia and Herzegovina , so Bosnia and Herzegovina , I genuinely believe, could provide a kind of bridge for Europe .

And if ever that bridge was needed, it is now, in this post 9/11 world.

For there exists today a vocal school of thought that insists on dividing humanity – a school of thought which argues passionately that, since the end of the Cold War, the great clashes are driven not by political, but by religious creeds.

That thesis was most famously argued by Samuel Huntington in his book 'The Clash of Civilisations'.

In the wake of the apparent triumph of liberalism – the collapse of the Soviet Union , the fall of the Berlin Wall, the spread of democracy and the opening of markets through globalisation – Huntington warned against an assumption that conflict would end.

"The most important conflicts in the future" he wrote, "will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations from each other". "Conflict" he noted, "along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1300 years" and "on both sides the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilizations".

To those who subscribe to this thesis, and I am not one of them, Bosnia and Herzegovina in general, and Mostar in particular, represent just such a cultural fault line – a Great Divide across which the Clash of Civilizations is destined to resound through the ages and forever.

For them, the destruction of the Old Bridge represented a gloomy vindication of their case, as the Old Bridge plunged into the Neretva below.

But the reconstruction of the Bridge – and the determination of people right across this country and beyond to see it rebuilt, stone by lovingly placed stone – punch great holes in the Huntington thesis.

And so does the renewal of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Because after the horrors of that terrifying war, this country has been making almost miraculous strides towards a stable peace.

Less than a decade after the end of the conflict, compare this with Ireland , Bask countries and Cyprus , this country has made progress that many predicted was impossible.

A million refugees have returned to their homes – many of them living alongside the very communities that drove them out.

There is complete freedom of movement. We have had free and fair elections. We have one of the stablest currencies in the Balkans and a growing economy.

Mostar now has a single, unified city government, and Sarajevo is returning to its familiar role as cultural entrepot.

No one can doubt there is a long way to go. It would be naïve to believe otherwise.

There are setbacks from time to time – acts of provocation and intimidation that damage communal relations and raise tensions.

But the trend is clear. While the people of this country continue, in the words of Ivo Andric, *“to rejoice and mourn, feast and fast by four different and antagonistic calendars and send all their prayers and wishes to one heaven in four different ecclesiastical languages”* they are also slowly, hesitantly, sometimes painfully re-establishing that paradoxical, but most profoundly Bosnian, tradition of unity through diversity that Andric so skillfully evokes.

It is a unity that comes from centuries of shared experience – of triumph and of tragedy – and from the certain knowledge, which the people of this country understand, that your futures are destined to be as intertwined, as has been your past.

It is the unity upon which the peace of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been based, and on which, more recently, the European Union was founded.

The old values turn out to be the new values too. For that unity is now further strengthened by the unshakable belief, held equally by all of BiH's peoples, that this country's future must be a European future.

Far from turning its back on Europe, as some predicted it would, BiH – its Muslim population included – is embracing Europe, and is single-mindedly focused on qualifying for membership of Europe's pre-eminent institution – the European Union.

Why is this important to the wider world?

Because it challenges directly the assumption that you can be European or Islamic, but you can't be both. The best and first person to express that view was Alija Izetbegovic and he was right.

It challenges also the tendency, both in the West and in the Islamic world, to portray each other's extremes as norms, and to judge each other accordingly.

Just as some Muslims have too readily viewed the West as an immoral haven for criminals, drug addicts and prostitutes, so too many in the West view the Islamic world as a haven for extremists and fundamentalists.

The truth of course bears little relation to these easy caricatures, in which we are in danger of being trapped.

How do we know this? Because the two live side by side in Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing the Islamic world with real experience of modern Europe, and providing Europe with a much-needed insight into the reality of Islam.

Indeed it is a remarkable tribute to the Muslim community of

BiH – as for the other religious communities for that matter – that, in the main, and despite the horrors they have been through in the all too recent past, they have resolutely declined to be radicalized, as a stroll along Sarajevo's boisterous and fashionable Ferhadija on a Saturday night will demonstrate.

Last September President Clinton came to open the cemetery at Srebrenica, where the victims of that European calamity are being steadily laid to rest. The ceremony took place in front of an audience of 20,000 Bosniaks, in a Serb majority area, guarded by Bosnian Serb police, in an atmosphere of calm dignity, without incident, and without rancour.

Compare and contrast with Northern Ireland funerals for those murdered by the other side. Or with what has been happening in Kosovo in recent times.

BiH's Muslims are showing in the practice of their everyday lives that Islam can be no less a European religion than Judaism or Christianity – and in so doing offering a glimpse of the kind of bridge that can exist between these allegedly competing civilizations.

But it is not just to the Islamic East that BiH offers Europe a bridge. In a strange way, it also connects Europe and North America.

Let me explain.

The fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina has managed to make such fast progress after the war is above all a tribute to the people of BiH – all the people of BiH.

But it is also a result of the support Bosnia and Herzegovina has received from a broad international coalition, which includes, among others, both the European Union and the United States.

Here again, BiH has something instructive to offer those beyond her borders of this remarkable small country.

The history of the war here is not just BiH's history: it is a dark chapter in Europe's book too. And in the history of transatlantic relations in general.

As Europe dithered, the fires of war took hold in Bosnia and Herzegovina . And history will deal with us harshly for that failure.

And for the fact that as Europe and America squabbled about what to do about it, the blaze raged out of control, until the United States said 'enough' and stepped in decisively to extinguish the conflict on the European territory and amongst the European people.

Fortunately, we have learned from our mistakes.

The efforts to build peace in this country are – at last – succeeding because this is a united effort, in which Europe and America are working diligently as partners.

Our policy is a common policy. We speak with one voice.

And Europe has learned too. Famously divided during the Yugoslav wars, Europe has now taken steps to get its act together.

Crucially, the EU has provided the political destination for this country and its neighbours to aim for – the prospect of membership of the European Union once they meet the required standards. And it is pouring huge resources, 20 million KM per year, into helping them to do so.

And Europe is improving its institutional arrangements too, to equip it to act more effectively in the world.

Henry Kissinger memorably inquired who he should call when he wanted to speak to Europe .

Now he has an answer – Javier Solana, as Europe 's Foreign Minister- to-be.

So here too Bosnia offers an example to her friends in the West.

As we work to rebuild the Atlantic relationship, to repair – post Iraq – fractured relations in NATO, we have here in Europe an example of that relationship which is already working well – a partnership between the US and the Europeans which remains an indispensable feature for re-building this country and which demonstrates what can be achieved when Europe and the US work together on a more equal basis than in the past.

EUFOR, which takes over here in December, is by far the largest and most important military operation ever put together by the European Union. NATO and the US remain in support, but Europe takes the lead.

The ease and speed with which this has been put together – and the evident amity and common purpose we saw last week in Sarajevo between Javier Solana and the NATO Secretary General, points to a new kind of Atlantic partnership – and it is being built here in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

So, tomorrow, the eyes of the world will once again be on Bosnia and Herzegovina , and on Mostar, at a ceremony that will be attended by among others His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales.

Twelve years ago, The Prince of Wales, speaking at the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies, observed, *"These two worlds – the Islamic and the Western – are at something of a crossroads in their relations. We must not let them stand apart..."*

That was true twelve years ago, and it is all too true today, post 9/11.

Whatever the gloomy developments elsewhere in the world, here in Mostar tomorrow, we will open a bridge that unites far more than two sides of a city. And in so doing, we will beam around the world a new, and, I hope, equally abiding image – of a bridge rebuilt, and communities re-connected.

Proof that what enmity destroys, hope can re-build, in that wonderful arc of stone.