

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues,

I am greatly honoured with this prestigious award. I am also very proud that I won this award in recognition of my contribution to the better understanding, exchange and cooperation in South East Europe, especially in the West Balkan region.

Indeed, that is what I have been trying to accomplish with “The Bridge” programme for more than sixteen years. It was launched in March of 1994 while war was ravaging the former Yugoslavia, at the time when wartime propaganda and hatred fomented by the state-controlled media made any communication between the region’s citizens, and even among relatives, almost impossible. The voices of tolerance were being drowned by trumpets of war and gun blasts. My colleagues and I asked ourselves if dialogue was at all possible after Vukovar, after Sarajevo - Srebrenica had not happened yet - after such disasters had taken place, after so much blood had been spilt. Starting a dialogue seemed an impossible goal of a small group of journalists from Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb, who got together in Munich to draw up the project of Radio Free Europe for the territory of the former Yugoslavia. It appeared impossible since hatred and xenophobia held the region strongly in their claws. We did try, however, and we found that there was a considerable number of people who were ready for dialogue. I am glad to say that my invitation to participate in the programme was refused by only a few people. Most of those I contacted accepted the invitation readily although it was rather risky to talk with someone from the other side of the front-line. Therefore, “The Bridge” was, in a sense, a testimony that dialogue and tolerance were possible in spite of war and its propaganda, and that hatred and xenophobia are not natural for this region, as nationalists always claimed.

Since the programme’s inception, more than a thousand people have taken part in the dialogue - government officials, opposition leaders, university professors, various experts, writers, actors, human rights activists, students, representatives of Catholic, Orthodox and Moslem religions, etc.

Kosovo has been, in addition to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbian-Croatian relations, a constant topic of “The Bridge”. The programme confronted views of two totally opposed sides which could hardly find one point in common. I sought to bridge - by means of public dialogue - the vast gap between Serbian and Albanian politicians and intellectuals, between the so-called "Serbian" and "Albanian" truths. Differences were not overcome, the participants stuck to their positions, but the burning issues were nevertheless discussed. It seems to me that “The Bridge” has succeeded in maintaining the continuity of the Serbian-Albanian dialogue in the past 16 years. It never paused, neither in the worst wartime years during the NATO intervention, when Milosevic’s regime terrorized Albanians, murdering and expelling them from their country, nor after the end of the war, when the local Serbian population fell victim to Albanian extremists.

When I started “The Bridge” program my motto was - it is better to talk a thousand days than to wage war one day. But, unfortunately, dialogue neither stops the war, nor can prevent it from erupting, especially in the Balkans. Nevertheless, I am happy if I present in my programme a single voice of reconciliation since nothing is more important now in the Western Balkans than tolerance.