

Balkan peace: Sweet dream or recurring nightmare?

Thessaloniki-based NGO strives for reconciliation in southeast Europe by linking grassroots organisations with allies like the Stability Pact and the Greek EU presidency

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CAN there be peace in the Balkans? An April 4-6 workshop to be held in the northern port city will be the first step towards paving the way for reconciliation and finding ways to peacefully resolve conflicts in the region.

The upcoming workshop will feature plenary sessions and working groups focusing on four key areas: awareness-building (education), consensus-building (religion), human rights and justice as well as arts and culture.

But can there really be a light at the end of the Balkan tunnel? Nenad Sebek, executive director of the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), seems to think so.

"If we don't succeed, we'll try again. And if we fail, we'll try again. And then we'll try once again," he tells the *Athens News* a day after Serbia's Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic was assassinated. "What are the guarantees of success? There are none. We need to be persistent."

Sebek feels that people are ready to pay for democracy with their lives, referring to the danger Djindjic's colleagues and those in the new FYROM government face following their crackdown on the mafia. "I would say organised crime and nationalism stand tall as the key problems in the region."

Sebek paraphrases Zarko Puhovski, a sociologist from Zagreb, who's been working on reconciliation in the region for the last 12 years. After a decade of war, there is a decade of passive hatred. After that, reconciliation can begin. Sebek elaborates: "So during these 10 years of hatred, somebody has to try something to prepare the ground for reconciliation which will come when the time is ripe."

This is where the CDRSEE, a non-governmental organisation established in 1998 by private citizens from within the region, fits in. While the chair of the board is Ambassador Richard Schifter from Washington, DC, most board members are from Europe and southeastern Europe, including the highly respected vice-chair, Nikos Efthymiadis, from Thessaloniki.

The centre aims to foster democratic, pluralist societies and market economies operating within the framework of the law. Operational funding comes from private sources in order to maintain political independence, but foreign ministries, foundations and organisations back specific projects.

"Reconciling for the Future" was launched in January in cooperation with the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, the Greek EU presidency and the foreign ministries of Norway and Sweden. An Internet forum (www.reconcilingforthefuture.org) has invited participants to express opinions about controversial regional issues. Viewpoints will then be used to help draw up the agenda of the April 4-6 workshop.

"This will be the beginning of a longterm process," says project manager Sheila Cannon. "We hope the 60 participants from the region, one-third of them under the age of 30, will come up with a viable plan for specific project ideas."

Speakers at the workshop include Erhard Busek, special coordinator of the Stability Pact, as well as moderators Thanos Veremis from the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (Eliamep), author and journalist Misha Glenny, and Vladimir Milcin, director of the Open Society Institute, Skopje.

A database of local associations concentrating on peaceful resolutions is also being compiled with the intention of weeding out "*gongos*" - dummy NGOs in the region with a reputation for siphoning off government funds. The project will also work towards the creation of a regional charter ensuring cooperation between governments and NGOs as well as the establishment of a network of ombudsmen which will oversee the charter's implementation.

"The world focused on southeast Europe after Djindjic's shooting, but now the spotlight is back on Iraq. I think it's a bad thing because the Balkans have not been resolved," says Sebek.

"But having said that," the former BBC correspondent of Yugoslav descent says, "the ultimate responsibility is in our hands. Yes, we need help and, sometimes, even force from abroad to make us come to our senses. But outsiders are not going to resolve our problems for us. I also see this as an opportunity for the region to take its future into its own hands."