



The European Union and the Western Balkans



Democratic Stabilisation





Democratic stabilisation - rebuilding societies in the West

Shared goals

A fully functioning and stable democracy is one of the bases of a modern society. And as the countries of the Western Balkans construct their future, they are working towards building secure democracies that will serve to underpin their political, economic, and social development.

This is an ambition shared with the European Union, which has expanded its area of peace, stability, prosperity and freedom over the last 50 years based on core democratic values and principles.

Improvements to the electoral system, the strengthening of civil society, the growth of independent media, and the chance to return home for those displaced in recent years – these are all components of a stable democracy, necessary to ensure peace and prosperity for all people living in the region.

Delivering assistance

The EU is spending over € 261 million between 2000 and 2004 to boost democratic stabilisation in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro. Most of the assistance is delivered through the EU programme known as 'Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation' – CARDS – with a commitment of € 4.65 billion to the region between 2000 and 2006.

Assistance is focused on helping societies in the region build and strengthen their own democratic institutions. Support is given to selected legislative change to enhance the framework for democracy with training offered to officials to help administrations function correctly. Also important are efforts to build democracy from grass-roots level to eradicate discrimination, reconcile ethnic tensions and improve human and civil rights. And the EU is helping to promote active and effective non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the emergence of vibrant independent media.

Gradually the people displaced during times of conflict in the region are coming home. But homecoming isn't always as easy as it should be - so the EU is helping overcome some of the difficulties.



Refugee Return in Bosansko Grahovo, September 2003

A € 3.3 million CARDS funded project is running to help the return of refugees and displaced persons to some of the most sensitive areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The help is comprehensive and concrete with repairs to heavily damaged houses and flats, and renewal of water and electricity supplies. There is an emphasis on rebuilding local industries, on job creation, and support for the start-up of smaller firms. And the returnees have often been directly involved in the rehabilitation work too.

Over 300 houses have been made suitable for use again. Altogether, well over one thousand people now have somewhere they can call home. Workshops and training sessions have helped show how new businesses can create new activity for the people who have come back.

For all the families that have come back home, CARDS has helped create a climate of re-integration, co-existence and reconciliation.



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Law students from the Saints Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje and the University of South East Europe in Tetovo are working alongside the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague, simultaneously researching and improving inter-ethnic relations.



Triangle Thematic Seminar, FYR Macedonia, December 2003.

This € 200,000 programme, aptly named "Triangle", is running through 2003 and 2004, giving 30 young people from different universities and ethnic backgrounds in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia the chance to work together under academic supervision to deepen understanding of different ethnic groups in the country.

The students are researching the operation of the national judiciary system in respect of inter-ethnic relations in a comparison with the European Convention for Human Rights and the European Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. One of the end-products will be the publication of a compendium highlighting where legislation and practice should be modified so that inter-ethnic relations are improved. A series of public debates is also being held.

The students themselves - Macedonians, Albanians, Roma, Turks and Serbs - say that working together leads to more dialogue and greater tolerance. Six working groups have been created, each with five students from diverse backgrounds, focusing particularly on non-discrimination, police treatment, and detention. A committee with student representatives from each university helps co-ordinate the work the students are doing, and chooses themes and outside experts to examine issues in more depth.

One of the beneficial side-effects of the project is to build up experience of this type of approach to developing civil society. And already the project is generating high-level enthusiasm, commitment and motivation as people learn to consider and respect the opinion of others.

The challenges

For those in the region who have suffered forcible displacement, democratic stability gives the security of knowing that no-one is going to arbitrarily demand that you leave your home. Others are seeking a relationship with local authorities or politicians that is based on a constitution rather than ethnic links. For those who lost possessions in the disruptions of recent conflicts, it can mean the possibility of returning home, or of recuperating such personal items as educational certificates or family photos.

Solid democracies count on a thriving civil society to promote citizen involvement and to ensure accountability of those in power. But the region has until now had an underdeveloped civil society, with insufficient financial resources and a lack of expertise. There has been a lack of effective co-operation between the scattered NGOs, and little contact between them and government.

Without healthy external review through the media, democracy lacks one of its indispensable supports. At present new media outlets in the region are still moving towards political and economic independence and building strong professional structures, while media related legislation, such as regulatory issues or defamation charges, often needs perfecting. State-owned and private media remain subject to interference on editorial policy, journalists cannot always work without fear of political meddling, and the relatively novel concept of access to public information is still emerging.



The EU response

The EU has made a difference – and is continuing to do so. Return of refugees and displaced people to their pre-war homes remains a key priority, to support minority and spontaneous return. The EU is also working to help ensure return is sustainable, through developing business and employment opportunities in return areas.

Civil society organisations are being helped to contribute to democratic stability and the overall progress of the country. Their partnerships with local authorities are being strengthened so they can articulate and advance the demands and concerns of citizens. This is allowing civil society to play a major role in social, political, cultural and economic life, fostering human rights and democracy at grass roots level. This often transcends ethnic links or provides alternative channels for expression, particularly for marginalised groups such as women and Roma communities, the handicapped and unemployed, and children.

The creation and implementation of anti-discrimination laws has a double value in an area as ethnically complex as the Western Balkans. They not only protect a minority community under potential threat in one of the countries in the region: they can also provide reassurance to majority groups in other countries that their ethnic cousins are adequately protected in a neighbouring country. In this way, democratic stabilisation can promote acceptance of the European values of co-existence and reconciliation.

Practical help

Proper and just legislation is one of the first steps to developing and supporting a well functioning civil society. CARDS helps ministries improve the legislative process. Institutions are being assisted to administer new laws on elections, media and support to civil society, and officials are being given new skills and organisational methods. On-the-spot experts from EU Member States are funded through "twinning" programmes to share their experiences with their counterparts in the region and help them drive forward reforms.

Consolidating democracy means the successful management of refugee return in many parts of the region. This process presupposes efforts to rebuild homes and infrastructure and promote regional economic development. It also aims to help forge closer links between returnees and local municipalities and NGOs and promote local and regional co-operation to help revitalise local economies.

CARDS allocation for democratic stabilisation

Million Euro 2001-2004



* Kosovo 44.3 Montenegro 1 Serbia 17.5

Independent media is being promoted through local training to raise journalistic professionalism and improve editorial independence. Projects are building legal frameworks that match European standards in guaranteeing access to public information and protection for journalists, and promoting regional co-operation between media organisations.

The EU has also helped independent media with



running costs and the purchase of equipment, and is increasingly focused on encouraging an environment where professional and independent media can function properly.

Practical help is also given to increase the capacity and quality of NGOs, enhancing co-operation amongst them, and promoting regular dialogue with government.

Perspectives for the future

Through its assistance CARDS is helping to develop stable democratic systems in the countries of the region and ensuring that political priorities reflect the general public interest, rather than consolidating the grip of entrenched power groups.

But the EU commitment goes beyond immediate technical assistance in democratic stabilisation. The EU has spelled out a clear vision of the way that each element of reform in the region is linked to preparation for eventual membership of the EU. Progress in democratic stabilisation underpins other vital reforms in economic and social life, in justice and home affairs, and in environmental protection – by increasingly giving the citizens in the region a direct stake in the changes underway.



CARDS has been funding the training of young Roma girls to cultivate and transmit their language, traditions and culture to the next generation. Illiteracy is high among Roma girls, and they often have very little knowledge of their own heritage. To

Training Programme for Roma Youth in Albania, November 2003

counter some of the factors leading to this situation - ranging from conservatism among the Roma community and persistent poverty to frequent discrimination and early marriage and pregnancy - the project worked with 200 girls living in the suburbs of Tirana.

The project taught the girls about Roma history, origin and culture, and encouraged them to follow their traditions, customs, and ethnic culture, so they could pass them on to the next generation. At the same time, with a view to boosting their self-esteem, it made them aware of their rights as a minority, and informed them about women's rights, domestic violence and children's education.

This € 15,000 project came to an end in mid 2003. But now it is moving into another phase, with World Bank support. And some of the outcomes have included building up the capacities of the leadership of Roma women, who have gone on to organise a Roma women NGO - the first of its kind in Albania.

Many of the women and girls who came to the training sessions were suffering from domestic violence, disease, homelessness, poverty, or unwanted pregnancy and the project helped put them in contact with other institutions and NGOs who could offer support and counselling. Now the girls are learning to think differently about their status in society and the family and are more determined either to go to school themselves, or at least to help their sisters or daughters to be more powerful.



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