

## **Town twinning as a tool to reinforce links with possible future member countries**

Dear Chairman,  
Dear Colleagues from other associations and institutions,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today and I thank you for your kind invitation. I greatly appreciate this opportunity to share with you the Serbian experience when it comes to twinning and its contribution to rebuilding and reinforcing democracy at the local level in Serbia and thus in South-east Europe in general.

Town twinning, as a concept where two municipalities from different countries make a formal agreement to twin and meet regularly, to exchange experiences, information and ideas with each other, is being shown as quite efficient and prosperous kind of international cooperation. It is interesting to see that this process does not refer only to developed countries, but also to developing countries that are preparing for their future EU membership. Hence, twinning becomes the manner of bringing together countries that may be geographically and conceptually distanced, however practically close. Through twinning, countries that are waiting for the accession at the EU get the opportunity to bond with other EU countries, to acquire knowledge and experience, as well as to develop their own capacities at the most basic level of any country, the local level.

Globalization and European integration mean that we live in an increasingly connected and interdependent world in which we both compete and cooperate with each other. In this fast-changing environment, the local government has a crucial role to play in actively working with our European and international partners for mutual learning and benefit.

Our local authorities are interested in creating the networks of partnerships and links with European and international local authorities, and in that manner, in developing a new form of international cooperation. From formal town twinning to technical assistance and project-based partnerships with the aim to build capacity – all of these links provide us the opportunity to find effective solutions to serious problems and to adjust our functioning with EU standards and values.

In the past, while Serbia was still part of the former Yugoslavia, there were many official twinings between Serbian municipalities and municipalities all over the world. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990's most of these twinings became dysfunctional. It was only in the last few years that new cooperation between Serbian municipalities and EU municipalities have been established and reactivated. Most of them were the result of EAR grant programs, such as the Neighborhood Program and Exchange Program; the last one implemented by the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities, on behalf of which I am speaking. The characteristics of these new forms of cooperation are that:

- most of the cooperation is in the form of projects to increase capacity in Serbian municipalities
- most of the twinning partners of Serbian municipalities are municipalities of the new EU member countries

It should be emphasized that many of these projects aim at improving relations with citizens through Citizen Assistance Centers, participative strategic planning, as well as through improved services. As such, these projects significantly contribute to increased democracy and stabilization and improve the quality of life in a substantial number of Serbian municipalities. Furthermore, these projects show that cooperation and exchange of know-how at the local level are important means of increasing capacities in Serbian municipalities and engaging Serbian citizens in the EU integration process.

Although EU accession is a goal that is underwritten by most of the Serbian municipalities, in practice this goal is still far away. This is a result of decision-making (or the lack of it) at the national level and the subsequent reaction and attitude by the EU.

The Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities, as national association of local self-government units, would like to stress that the situation at the municipalities is quite encouraging when it comes to the issue of the EU accession. At the municipal level, we see a lot of young mayors that are very enthusiastic and keen to develop their municipalities, and even more to adopt EU standards, methods and best practices. However, for the time being the only possibility for Serbian municipalities to acquire these methods and best practices lays in cooperation with EU municipalities on projects or twinning basis.

The Exchange Program mentioned above has lead to a rather large number of official twinning agreements signed between Serbian municipalities and municipalities from the new EU member states. This is in itself a very positive development. The Standing Conference would welcome, however access for countries of the Balkan to more twinning resources, such as for example the EU Twinning Program or Europe for Citizens Program. Not only to make more twinings possible and improving local democracy and development, but also to contribute to a more open attitude of Serbian citizens to the EU and thus contributing to European democracy and integration.

We hope that the readiness and willing of our municipalities to follow the EU direction, their efforts invested in this goal, will be able to reinforce the capacity of our country to become a respective candidate, and hopefully a member of the EU. This Conference and opportunity to meet with and to acquire the experiences from all of you can only make our determination even stronger. By supporting our initiatives and by developing cooperation with our municipalities, you will be able to contribute to the enhancement of democracy in Serbia, to create an even more supportive attitude towards EU integration in Serbia and to establish an open society. It goes without saying that the Balkans, and thus Europe in general, will be able to benefit from the established security, democracy and prosperity in this region.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for generous time and attention on this important topic.