

Ambassador Michael Tatham's speech at the opening ceremony for the VolontEurope Conference

Sarajevo, 8 October 2009

I am very pleased and honoured that the opening ceremony and accompanying reception for the 18th VolontEurope Conference is taking place in my Residence. I welcome you all warmly to this event.

The timing of this Conference strikes me as highly appropriate for a number of reasons.

With the Irish Referendum result still fresh, there has been a lot of debate about cooperation between European countries at inter-governmental level within the existing EU institutional structures.

VolontEurope provides an excellent example of another form of European cooperation – bottom-up cooperation at the civic level. That strand of cooperation is equally important for our future together in Europe. European cooperation is not something that should be confined to the corridors of government and the institutions of the EU in Brussels or OSCE in Vienna. It is something that should be happening constantly at the level of local government, civil society and the public as a whole.

Before attending this event, I read the list of participants and the list of conference workshops and was struck by the range and diversity of themes that you are going to tackle.

Although it would be wrong for the British Government to claim any of the credit for this (since all the British participants are themselves volunteers), I am also very pleased that British representatives from civil society are contributing so fully to this event.

The British Government is in no doubt about the value of voluntary action and the vital role that citizen involvement can play in improving services to those in need, in complementing and monitoring the work of government and in developing a stronger civic society.

The organisation, Community Service Volunteers, is a long-established and much valued partner and interlocutor of government. I am delighted that its Executive Director, Dame Elisabeth Hoodless, (who is also President of VolontEurope) is present tonight.

The British Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina works to a carefully drawn-up strategic plan and one of the key elements of this is contributing to the empowerment of civil society. We have done this notably through supporting outreach projects in the judicial sector. This outreach has ensured that processes of public consultation take place, that dialogue takes place between civil society and voluntary organisations and official institutions and that there is greater visibility of institutions which serve the public and need to be as transparent as possible towards the public.

The British Embassy also works directly with civil society organisations some of whom, such as Centre for Civic Initiatives, Transparency International, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and the Bosnia Media Centre have been highly effective project implementing partners.

The emergence of a powerful and effective civil society is one of the hardest challenges for those countries going through the process of post-communist democratic transition. Broadly speaking, the Communist Governments of Central and Eastern Europe sought to disempower the public and saw civil society as a threat rather than as an opportunity. At the same time, the challenges of political and economic transition (compounded in Bosnia's case by conflict legacy challenges) have created a huge space and demand for the kind of role that civil society organisations can play.

That is why it sends a huge positive signal that so many of the workshops taking place during this conference will be led by Bosnian participants. Speaking as a diplomat based in Bosnia, I think it is sometimes very easy for our perceptions to be overly formed by the loud and depressing noise generated by politicians and not enough by the committed and effective work taking place in civil society and the

voluntary sector throughout the country, both at local and national level. To have achieved this level of commitment against a difficult and forbidding background is a major achievement and to those Bosnian representatives present now, I congratulate you wholeheartedly.

While the Volonteurope conference is taking place in Sarajevo, a few miles away in Butmir there will be high-level political negotiations between Bosnia's political leaders in the presence of international community representatives.

These negotiations, if successful, will give impetus to Bosnia and Herzegovina's further progress down the road towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. But this journey is not one that the politicians can steer on their own. The challenges and responsibilities involved will require the full engagement of civil society and the public.

I hope that this conference can play its part in strengthening the capacity of Bosnia and Herzegovina's civil society and voluntary organisations to meet that challenge. Active citizenship will be essential. I hope that all present will benefit from the opportunity for exchange of ideas and best practice. I wish you all a successful conference.