

## **Theme 4 – Troubled Waters: Reclaiming a Common Space?**

### **The Igman Initiative**

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The Igman Initiative is a joint project of more than hundred NGOs for reviewing and fostering a process of regional cooperation. It focuses on the so-called Dayton triangle, consisting of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - that is, Serbia and Montenegro.

Why these three countries? Because many of the region's problems are concentrated in the relations between them. On the one hand, Serbian-Croatian relations have been through history either the source of discord and instability in the region or, sadly less often, the backbone of its peace and security. On the other hand, there is no lasting stability in the region without the integrity and full sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the absence of any aspiration on the part of Serbia or Croatia to exert patronage over Republika Srpska or Herzeg-Bosnia.

The project is named after an extraordinary event that took place in 1995 during the siege of Sarajevo by forces of the Bosnian Serb Army. Risking their lives from sniper and heavy artillery fire from surrounding hills, a group of 42 well-known intellectuals from Serbia and Montenegro travelling for 48 hours through Hungary and Dalmatia to Sarajevo although Sarajevo is only some 400 km from Belgrade. They entered the city through a tunnel after passing over Mount Igman in order to demonstrate their solidarity with the citizens of Sarajevo.

### **What are the problems of common concern?**

For the first time in history all countries of the region have the same aspiration and strategic objective – to join the process of European

integration. By itself, this is the most promising feature of the region with all its diversity and unhealed wounds.

But if one can say that the road toward Europe is clearly marked, it is certainly not strewn with roses. On the contrary – it is bumpy, potholed and long. Two dimensions of this process have been present in every and each country of the region. One, the most important, is the internal transformation of our societies and states, transition and the building of democratic institutions. The other is integration or preparation for the integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions and political processes. The third, equally important dimension, which should serve as a connective tissue between the two – regional cooperation – has been neglected.

Our simple message to political leaders is: integration does not start in Brussels, but at home, in the region. Although some progress has been made recently, the process is, on our assessment, too slow – there is simply insufficient political will on the part of our political leaders to enter the process of full mutual normalization decisively and unconditionally. A serious obstacle to the free communication of citizens and economic, cultural and other cooperation is the present visa regime, which is still rigid and discouraging. Extremely difficult problems of refugees and their return and reintegration remain unsolved. The problem of borders between Croatia and Yugoslavia has been repeatedly adjourned.

## How do we work?

1. We meet every 3-4 months to review and assess the situation and produce new initiatives. We act as a pressure group, we lobby parliaments and governments, we try to inform and motivate the

general public. The last session called on the three presidents to come together to give serious impetus to mutual cooperation, and to initiate regular meetings of prime ministers, foreign and other ministers. Heads of states and prime ministers only meet each other at the international conferences at the moment.

2. We have groups of leading experts in many fields who prepare concrete projects that we present to our governments, demanding action. We recently called on the presidents and foreign ministers of the three countries and presented two projects: a draft agreement on the establishment of a free trade zone (with the idea of inviting other countries in the region to join), and a mini-Schengen project for full liberalization of the visa regime with a view to abolishing visas completely.
3. We have produced initiatives for transboundary local government cooperation. One is well established: between Tuzla (in Bosnia-Herzegovina), Osijek (in Croatia) and Novi Sad (in Serbia). The three mayors recently signed an agreement on ethnic tolerance. The other, more sensitive and delicate, is cooperation between Dubrovnik (in Croatia), Trebinje (in BH) and Herzegnovi (in Montenegro). It is double sensitive: Dubrovnik was heavily shelled and damaged by Montenegrin and Serbian military and paramilitary units. And mayors of the three cities belong to parties that were closely linked with previous regimes. However, we believe that it is a worthwhile challenge to try, mostly through NGOs, to institute cooperation in various fields of common concern that could not be solved separately, such as water supply, protection of the environment, fire fighting, promotion of tourism etc.