



International Interfaith Conference 19 March 2016, Prizren, Kosovo

***Speech by Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović,
Secretary General of Europa Nostra***

*Your Royal Highness,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am grateful for this opportunity to return to Kosovo after a far too long period of 35 years. Last time, I came here as a high school graduate from Belgrade, who was very proud of the multicultural treasures of my former country – Yugoslavia. Today, I am back to Kosovo as the Secretary General of Europa Nostra, the leading European heritage organisation. And I am passionate about promoting the value of our shared heritage as a key resource not only for sustainable development but also for peace in Europe.

Raising awareness and mobilising support for saving Europe's endangered heritage is a key mission of our organisation. This mission is particularly relevant for Kosovo and for the wider region of the Western Balkans where, alas, heritage remains very much in danger. Not only religious heritage – some of which figure on UNESCO's World Heritage List in Danger – but also vernacular heritage in both cities and villages.

Europa Nostra therefore wishes to launch a strong appeal to all authorities, organisations, communities and citizens concerned to jointly give a higher priority to safeguarding and enhancing the rich and diverse cultural heritage in the Western Balkans. We also believe that ensuring a proper safeguard of heritage and cooperating with neighbours in this field should be a requirement for membership in European and international organisations for any country of the Western Balkans.

Your Royal Highness, like so many I have listened very carefully to your moving and meaningful speech made last Thursday in Belgrade. You spoke about the beauty and importance of BRIDGES, and you recalled your fond memory of attending the celebration of the reconstruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar. Here in the Balkans, we indeed must continue restoring old bridges and building new ones, both physical bridges as well as the invisible ones which connect the hearts and minds of peoples and individuals.

However, restoring stones, bricks or wood is not enough. We must give equal attention to the proper interpretation of the historical and cultural significance of heritage sites. Far too often, here in the Balkans – like in many other post-conflict societies – heritage has become instrumentalised as a tool for perpetuating divisions and wounds rather than as a vital bridge between various ethnic and religious communities. Therefore, any future efforts by public and private bodies should make sure that the safeguard of heritage is accompanied by the proper understanding and teaching of history: local, regional and European which are so firmly interwoven. We also must respect and protect the identity and the memory of the living communities, ethnic or religious, which are closely connected with individual heritage sites or their ensembles. Europa Nostra and I firmly believe that the multicultural and multireligious character of the Balkans should be treated as a strength and not as a weakness. Especially today when Europe and the world are confronted with such an alarming rise in various forms of intolerance and extremism.

*Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Two months ago, I have had the honour to present our European Heritage Award for the regeneration of the Middleport Pottery in England to HRH the Prince of Wales in his capacity as the visionary Founder and Patron of the Prince's Regeneration Trust. The exemplary practices of this and other heritage organisations from all over Europe – such as Cultural Heritage without Borders CHwB) – can serve as inspiration also for the Balkans. And Europa Nostra stands ready to contribute to this vital cross-border exchange of creative and innovative solutions for the benefit of our shared Heritage, and for the benefit of our Europe.