
Wounds of the Past and the Present: Walls, Fences, and Imaginary Geography

A CONVERSATION WITH
PRESIDENT KOLINDA GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ OF CROATIA

FLETCHER FORUM: *In a speech given at the UN, you stated that climate change is a powerful weapon of mass destruction. We were hoping that you could elaborate on how you see climate and climate control as security issues.*

KOLINDA GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ: Absolutely. Climate and climate control are intertwined with security in every possible way. We've seen entire countries starting to disappear, small island countries. Even in Croatia as a coastal state, we've seen the sea levels rising. In Italy, across the Croatian coast, Venice is sinking, one of the reasons being the rising sea levels due to the melting polar ice caps. Climate change is definitely one of the elements that will continue to contribute to the migratory waves of asylum seekers, people fleeing from war, destruction, terrorism, oppression, and

Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović was elected Croatia's first female, post-independence head of state in January 2015. Under her leadership, Croatian foreign policy has been concerned with such issues as the European migrant crisis, reaffirming good relations with Iran, expressing support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, climate change and global warming, and the Three Seas Initiative (the twelve EU nations that border the Adriatic, the Baltic, or the Black Sea). Prior to her election to the Presidency, Grabar-Kitarović served for three years as NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy where she was the first Assistant Secretary General in NATO's history and the highest ranking woman in NATO. From 1993-2008, Grabar-Kitarović served in the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs where her positions included Minister for European Integration (2003-05), the first female Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (2005-08) where her mandate was to lead Croatia on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration (NATO membership and EU accession), and Ambassador to the United States (2008-11).

economic migrants that we've seen so far. People will be running in search of a home to live once their countries disappear. So I believe that this is one of the security threats of the future that we have to start working on very firmly today. Croatia has signed and ratified the Paris Agreement. We will continue to stick not only to the provisions of the Agreement, but we will also continue to do whatever is in our power to provide for climate control, for control of environmental pollution, and the protection of the environment in Croatia. Our forests, for instance, are disappearing, especially the evergreen forests, because of the acid rain that we get from the west and other parts of Europe that are more developed and have more industrial pollution. So climate control is something that cannot be stopped by walls, or wires, or borders; it's something that is our joint obligation for the future of mankind.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You spoke about the migratory waves of the future. Let's talk about the migratory waves of the present. How has the refugee influx from conflicts in the Middle East affected Croatia in relation to Eastern Europe, and what policies and programs has Croatia created to address this pressing issue?*

GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ: Well, unfortunately, it has become one of those divisive issues in the European Union where we as the European Union were

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not able to find a permanent common response, only a temporary distribution mechanism. I do hope that the agreement with Turkey will hold. In spite of these temporary agreements, I think we have failed in finding a common solution to migration. There are about sixty million people on the move now worldwide because of poverty, destruction, war, inequality, persecution, et cetera. Millions of them are in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Europe is

just too small to take in all of the misery of the world. But Europe is also big enough to take a much more active role in resolving the root causes of those migrations, and that pertains to Agenda 2030 just like protection of the environment, climate change, climate control. So, I think that we as the European Union must find strength to make our common foreign, security, defense, and development policy work to start dealing with the root causes of migration.

The immediate threat, of course, is war and the terrorist activities that we see in the MENA basin, the Mediterranean and Middle East basin. We need to, I think, play a stronger role in the Syrian conflict; the sorting out of the situation in Iraq so that it becomes a viable democracy; and in fighting terrorism in all its forms. But we must also keep in mind that the root causes of terrorism are poverty, inequality, lack of education, intolerance, and dissatisfaction that breed—especially with the young people—the youth bulge that we’ve had in the Mediterranean. These unhappy people are searching for radical ideologies in order to try to fulfil themselves instead of working together in order to try to create jobs and to find alternative livings for these people. So the migration wave that we saw back in 2015-2016, in my opinion, was very unfair. That is why I criticized it; we let a flood of people, about one million people, come to the EU, and then we shut the gates. I was there, out in the field, observing the migrants themselves and talking to them. Eighty-five percent of them were men of so-called fighting age. I would often ask, “Where are your families?” They were left behind in countries like Afghanistan or Pakistan. It was mostly Syrian refugees who would come with the families. So, what happened during that time is that we let the fastest—the ones who were most capable of traveling—to get to the EU and we left behind those who

were in true need. Those families—women and children—are suffering in Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in other places. So I was always critical of that migration wave because I think that it was just providing opportunities for those who could manage. But those who truly couldn’t, it was almost like hypocrisy, trying to say that we took in one million people. Yes, but what about the millions who have been left behind?

And if you have one donor conference on Syria, for instance, as important as it is to donate millions and millions of dollars or euros to that, you have to keep in mind the cost that

we incur for the migrants who flow through our countries. It could have been used so much better in the countries of origin, or in the neighboring countries, in order to create the proper reception centers. Not camps, but

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reception centers for them to be able to have an education, to have health care, to have all the conditions of what we call human security in the UN context. Because we need someone who will rebuild Syria, who will rebuild Iraq, ultimately. But they also have the right to a decent life, and children have the right to education. I'm afraid we're talking now about a whole lost generation who have not been able to attend proper schooling, to get proper education and medical attendance, and who are unable to live in normal social circumstances that would teach them to be responsible members of society and of their own countries in the future.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You were instrumental in Croatia's joining both NATO and the EU in 2009 and 2013, respectively. Of course, we now know that those two years are right on the verge of the transition into the post2008 world and then into Russian revanchism. So, looking back, how would you weigh out the pros and cons of joining NATO at the time, and how has that worked out since then, as the headlines have been increasingly dominated by troubles, whether they're political, social, or financial?*

GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ: Well, you know, ever since we strived for independence we wanted to become a member state of the EU and NATO and ultimately rejoin the Western world. I'll be talking today about real geography and imaginary geography. Imaginary geography divides Europe into

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..... East and West. I do not acknowledge that in the real world, but when you travel across the European world you see the differences between the countries that used to be behind the Iron Curtain (Croatia broadly included) and those that were not. So, at the time, yes, any situation in life carries its pros and cons, but the benefits of membership were so much greater to neutralize the potential difficulties or backlashes. Sharing of sovereignty in certain areas is not a problem as long as you are truly sitting at the table and taking the lead in creating common policies, including the common foreign and security, agricultural and fisheries, and many other policies that are of substantial interest to Croatia.

Of course, the EU funding was one of the elements that was appealing to people, and that helps Croatia in overcoming the setbacks of the recession. Unfortunately, our recession was much longer than most of the European countries. But again, there was never a choice. I mean, although the support for the EU membership dwindled, now that we are a member state of the EU and NATO, if you look at the Eurobarometer findings or any kind of polling, you'll see that most of the population supports our EU and NATO membership. We remember the Europe with borders, with walls, with barbed-wire fences, et cetera. Unfortunately, as a result of the migration crisis, we have another razor-wire fence between Croatia and Slovenia and Croatia and Hungary. I hope those will disappear in due time but when you look at the old "spheres of influences" concept, Russia was never a key player when it comes to Croatia. It was mostly the eastern

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part of our region, which I don't like calling the Balkans because of the connotations that it has. And now I'm talking about imaginary geography, including the Balkans together, as opposed to geographical borders, which I think is something that's keeping the people of the EU away from further enlargement to the so-called Western Balkans. Nobody wants "Balkans" or balkanization, dissipation, war, et cetera, in your own house. So I prefer to call it Southeastern Europe as a neutral term.

Yet, NATO and the EU have been so hesitant in the meantime to proceed with the accession process. In terms of resolving our open issues, we've seen a vacuum develop that is being filled by third forces. I'm not just talking about Russia; I'm talking about different influences and other actors acting as pull factors and as centrifugal forces in the whole neighborhood of Southeast Europe and in the unity of the neighborhood, of it becoming a viable part of the EU and NATO. And this isn't Europe's backyard. In all respects, it's Europe's front yard which needs to be incorporated into the common European house. Because only then will we have Europe whole, free, and at peace. We've repeated it so many times that it's become a mantra.

But for somebody who lived through a war, whose youth was robbed by that war, although it was a difficult, challenging experience, it was also a formative experience that I today would not change for anything else. It's

an experience that made me stronger. So as someone who has come from that region, I truly believe in that mantra of Europe whole, free, and at peace. And we must do everything that we can in order to prevent another war to ever come up on the European soil.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Can you speak a little bit about “real” versus “imaginary?” Our theme for this print edition is the global battle for truth, so we’re looking at all sides of different debates. A lot of problems that are racking the EU and similar institutions right now come down to these competing claims for truth. For example, the truth that Europe’s long history of violence, or the EU’s continuing imperfection versus that European integration has brought unprecedented stability, prosperity, democracy, et cetera. So how do you confront these competing claims?*

GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ: It’s not always easy. For me, European integration has absolutely been a very, very positive process that has truly brought Europe together. But we still see these differences in imaginary geography between the East and the West. And we need to erase that, in physical and in all other terms. So, you still see that there is lack of an infrastructure, of energy, of transportation, and other infrastructure—thus my Three Seas Initiative that has been embraced by twelve EU member countries.

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So we need to pull the continent closer together. It has been imperfect, and it has had its setbacks. Yet I think that the accession process, or rather what I call the consolidation of Europe—because Europe will not be enlarging anywhere, it will be incorporating the areas that truly belong to the continent—is a natural process that will guarantee freedom, stability, and prosperity on the continent.

Of course, there will always be skeptics in our own country and in many other countries. There will always be push and pull factors, and, unfortunately, we’ve seen more pull than push factors lately. Brexit has been an event that has shocked us all, but we do respect the will of the people of the UK that they expressed in the referendum. We’ll be sorry to see the UK leave, but I hope that the

UK will remain engaged, especially in the Euro-Atlantic structures. This is also where we see the role of the United States, closely connected to the European continent to keep the peace, to keep the stability, and to keep the prosperity. The threats to security today are becoming so volatile and so unpredictable, and they develop so fast that none of us can protect ourselves individually. As I've said already, no walls and no razor wires will protect us. It's only collaboration and sharing of values, which we often forget about. One of the basic ones—solidarity—is what will protect us from future dangers.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Just expanding a little bit more on this theme, we at The Forum have been very concerned with prevailing dueling narratives. Recently, the suicide of General Praljak shocked the world. He's been identified as both a war hero and a war criminal. We were wondering to what extent this has reopened old wounds in the region, especially as they relate to miscarriages of justice in both the verdict and the war?*

GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ: It has, it has, and when I go to New York on Wednesday, I'll be speaking in front of the UN Security Council. I have to tell you very honestly, I've been writing that speech in my mind over and over again, over and over. I think I'll be up late at night. Perhaps I won't even go to sleep come Tuesday night because I, first of all, have to be responsible for the future of my country. The past has burdened us for such a long time. I personally do have mixed feelings about the ICTY. We did support its founding, and we did support the fact that they should have tried individuals for war crimes perpetrated on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in different wars and to bring about the conditions for reconciliation. But it dragged on for a long time, and I think that we really need to be objective in looking at the results that we've seen. It's basically been one of the first (apart from the court in Rwanda) international criminal courts—if we forget about the Nuremberg Trials a long time ago. We have to be realistic, look at the lessons learned, and see where the court has done right and where the court has done wrong.

Of course, as a Croatian and as the president of Croatia, it's not easy for me to speak about that because we feel that injustices have been done in the work of the court. But on the other hand, I feel the responsibility for the future not just for Croatia but for the whole neighborhood—and my primary intent and goal—is to complete that reconciliation between all the countries in the region and all the peoples of the region. I want to put those open issues behind us and resolve them with a view to the future. I want to look at our young people and say that we want to keep them in the

region. For that we need to keep an open mind. Croatia has been dealing with its past; it's not easy to acknowledge that members of your own ethnic community have committed crimes, but we've done that, and we expect others to do that as well.

And I don't want for any of the indictments of the ICTY to be some sort of grounds for future bickering and fighting and shifting guilt. What

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I want is to really look into the future. Bosnia and Herzegovina is so important to us. It's so sensitive because we have the three nations living there. For you who live in democracies that are based on individual participation, it's difficult to accept and to understand the concept of the three nations. But for the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it's so important. So, I want for this case not to put further obstacles in terms of friendship for the Croat and the Bosniak people or the

Serb people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I just would like to draw that line and look into the future of friendly mutual relations and of keeping the people in the country—of keeping Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina—because without Croats there will be no Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country might fall apart, and I'm really concerned about some of the developments that could lead to opening up some of the old wounds and some of the old problems from the past. I'd really rather close them and move on rather than keep talking about the past all the time. *f*