

Speech: 9th UNESCO Regional Summit of Heads of State of South East Europe, Belgrade, 2 September 2011

Dear Presidents,

Ministers,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to warmly thank His Excellency Mr Boris Tadic for inviting me to be with you, this year, at the 9th UNESCO Regional Summit of Heads of State of South East Europe, and to intervene on the topic "Modern Art and reconciliation in South East Europe".

I'm also very pleased to be in this famous and remarkable archaeological site of Viminacium, an ancient Roman site and one of the most significant testimony of the history on the river Danube.

As you know the EU and the UNESCO have a long lasting and strong partnership in various areas, including in Culture. This partnership for culture probably reached its full meaning, in 2005, with the adoption of the UNESCO Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.

UNESCO has been brave when deciding to tackle the delicate issue of cultural diversity at global level with the instrument of a Convention.

For the EU, supporting the Convention was a natural extension of its own commitment to cultural diversity, one of the specific characteristic of the European project.

The UNESCO Convention provides for an overall framework for culture and constitutes a fully-fledged instrument of cultural governance for cultural diversity at the international level.

Today, I see my invitation to speak in this Regional Summit as a sign of the increasingly recognised role played by culture and the arts in connecting people from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. The connections lead to a gradual, but strong process of reconstruction and reconciliation in different parts of the world and also in this South East European region.

In the history of the European integration, Europe has been a cultural project since its very beginning. Indeed, building Europe has always meant integrating various histories, value systems, and world views.

Cultural diversity lies at the heart of the European project. Opening to cultural diversity, respecting differences, is the precondition for this project – the histories and the perspectives of European peoples are unquestionably different, and not accepting differences has always been at the root of the disgraces that ruined Europe and that in the past century slowed so much its development.

Respect for cultural diversity is one of the pillars of our Union. I believe this is one of the main reasons why our process of integration has had such a huge power of attraction across the continent and beyond. The process of European integration can be described as a giant experiment in intercultural dialogue; as a successful attempt to turn our diversity into value.

There is no doubt that cultural diversity is a great resource: meeting other cultures gives us the capacity to look at things from different perspectives, and can lead to new ways of thinking and creating.

Openness to cultural diversity enhances the pool of potential new ideas, creativity and cultural expressions. And our capacity to imagine, create, and innovate is a crucial economic and social asset in the knowledge age. People with different educational, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, brought together in an open working environment, can create an inspiring and innovative workplace, and generate new ideas. This is the reason why art and creativity have a power in healing souls and motivating people for changes and exchanges. It is a unique way of expressing the common human aspirations in a complex world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

How can we harness the specific power of the art, not only to celebrate diversity, but to promote the changes of mindset which are necessary to heal wounds and open to reconciliation? In the cultural sector, we have often started with heritage. We transformed it into a powerful tool for reconciliation, mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. In this spirit, we have, for example, worked jointly with the Council of Europe on heritage rehabilitation projects in the Western Balkans.

But, I believe that contemporary creation can even more easily provide a space for opening to diversity and to intercultural dialogue. Contemporary creation questions our societies, opens our minds, and allows us to bring some objectivity to our dealing with both past and current times. It can, with its very diverse means, from plastic arts to literatures, from film to theatre or music, trigger the mindset change we need.

Moreover, dialogue and cooperation between artists and cultural workers from different backgrounds, as well as the mobility of their works across borders, can bring a new perspective. The sharing of different visions – or points of view – on the same challenges is a fundamental stimulus for mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue.

Within the EU, we have been, since 2007, supporting transnational cooperation in culture and contemporary creation.

The promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue is one of the main objectives of the Agenda for Culture which the EU embraced in 2007. The Agenda also foresees a vital role for culture in EU external relations.

In this regard, the Slovenian Presidency of the EU made the external dimension of culture a priority when organising the Ljubljana Conference, in May 2008. By focusing on the Western Balkans and the neighbouring region, it provided a good opportunity

for civil society and policy makers to exchange views with the cultural sector and deepen their cooperation.

In order to implement the objectives of the European Agenda for Culture, new working methods with the Member states (the so-called open method of coordination) have been put into practice. This method consists of agreeing common objectives and exchanging best practices and relevant information in order to foster mutual learning. In this context, it is interesting to note that among the topics selected for cooperation in the 2011 – 2014 work plan, the role of cultural institutions as spaces for intercultural dialogue will be studied.

When it comes to financial instruments, the EU Culture programme allows cultural professionals from the EU Members States and from the wide majority of South East Europe countries to participate in cross-border co-operation projects that strengthen cultural diversity and enhance our shared cultural heritage. This cooperation contributes to the mobility of artists and other cultural professionals as well as to the mobility of works of arts; it contributes to mutual understanding and esteem between individuals, communities and peoples.

Take the DAH Theatre here in Belgrade as an example. For 20 years it has worked to promote cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue through the use of drama, and has created an award-winning project entitled, "the in/visible city,". It reflects on the positive aspects of cultural and national differences. Public buses have become stages for interactive performances where passengers are invited to uncover the rich, multiethnic history of their city and the people who live there.

The project has been so successful (they won the ERSTE Foundation's Award for Social Integration in 2009) that the DAH Theatre decided to go international. Thanks to a grant from the EU Culture Programme it is now working with counterparts in the UK, Denmark and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to continue to foster intercultural understanding.

In the cinema and audiovisual sector the MEDIA and MEDIA Mundus programmes are also contributing to this cultural exchange even if they primarily aim at strengthening our audiovisual industry.

To continue its support, the Commission is currently working on the future of the Culture and MEDIA Programmes beyond 2013. Our idea is to have a "Creative Europe" framework programme, bringing together the current Culture, MEDIA and MEDIA MUNDUS programmes under a common umbrella. The "Creative Europe" programme will establish a comprehensive support programme for the cultural and creative sectors in Europe.

Creative Europe will facilitate the full participation of Western Balkan countries and, as far as possible, cooperation with the whole EU Neighbourhood.

In this regard, I'm happy to announce that the Commission has proposed a budget increase of 37% for the future culture programme. We believe that this is a crucial time and a tremendous opportunity to really unleash the potential of our culture and contemporary creation. It will generate jobs and growth, bring intellectual stimulation and fulfilment and reinforce mutual understanding across cultures.

To conclude, I hope that we can continue to harness the potential of culture to replace the barriers that separate people with the bridges that unite them, so as to foster peaceful, stable societies in the greater Europe.

Thank you.