

Address of the President of the Republic of Croatia Stjepan Mesić at the Opatija Summit

Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Southeastern Europe has always been a point of contact between different civilizations and cultures, a border area in which different interests crossed and overlapped, an area disputed by different powers. It is a small part of the world, with barely one hundredth of the world's population, poor and burdened by its past - and extremely rich in terms of its contribution to world heritage.

The fifty-nine cultural and natural sites in the region registered in the UNESCO World Heritage List are the best case in point.

But not everything that was created has been inherited as well. "Heritage without heirs", a syntagm devised by a Croatian scientist, has been for centuries the definition which described the attitude towards heritage. Namely, in order to be alive heritage has to communicate with time, it must be used as a factor stimulating growth, understanding and cooperation and not as a basis for erecting new walls.

International cultural cooperation develops in various ways. All the countries in the world which try to preserve and develop their cultural identity while avoiding extremes - global cultural unification or cultural isolation - are interested in the expansion of international cultural cooperation.

But rather than unification or isolation, we want to achieve cultural integration of both 'great' and 'small' cultures, and use such a policy to secure comprehensive minority protection and minority integration, and in this particular area this is maybe more important than in any other part of Europe.

Croatia is really aware of such priorities, as witnessed by the fact that it was the first European state to ratify the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversity.

Over the past fifteen years the region of Southeastern Europe has experienced major changes at the political, economic, social and cultural level. Unfortunately, in this period of major upheavals, and of a difficult transition and democratization, and the redefinition of cultural identity, regional cooperation was not a priority.

The wish for integration in the global community, primarily in the European Union, has focused most efforts in the field of cultural cooperation on major West European centres. The eyes of this part of the world, turned to Europe, too often missed the neighbours.

Although it has to be admitted that new forms of cultural cooperation in the region are still inadequate, unsystematic, largely funded by the international community and international organizations, there is increasingly notable progress in networking, transfer of knowledge, artist mobility and the use of new information technologies.

An important step in that direction has been made by the Presidents of the states of Southeastern Europe in their cooperation with UNESCO and the Council of Europe focused on enhancing intercultural dialogue and cooperation in the region. Since the first meeting in the UNESCO headquarters in 2002 through the forums in Ohrid, Tirana and Varna, emphasis has been placed on peace and progress, openness, tolerance and interdependence, so badly needed in the region. Our meeting in Opatija is a precious contribution to continued achievement of these goals.

Croatia's cultural cooperation is distinguished by openness which matches the definition of this country as a Central European, Mediterranean and Southeast European country, and a country that cares for democracy peace and cooperation in the region. After entering the European Union Croatia will continue, of course, to belong to this part of the world, Europe's southeast, both geographically and in terms of contiguous cultural elements. Croatia continues to promote new forms and approaches to cooperation and dialogue in the region, particularly in the "transformation of corridors of the past into privileged routes of cultural communication of the future", as UNESCO's Director General Koïchiro Matsuura symbolically put it at the last year's forum.

Cultural cooperation in this region has already demonstrated that common cultural circles and parts of history can be translated into new common themes of cooperation and into a modern spirit of cultural partnership. One of such common themes is also the theme of this year's meeting - the communication of heritage.

A point which is especially important within the scope of this theme, in my view, is the linking of cultural cooperation with other spheres such as science, education, tourism and protection of the environment. This contributes to the achievement of the vision of sustainable development as a common, international goal of cooperation, and the vision of Southeastern Europe as a modern European region.

Thank you!