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on the occasion of the Regional Summit Forum of South-East Europe

Opatija, Croatia, 1 June 2006

Distinguished Presidents of the South East Europe region,
Mr Prime Minister of Croatia,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be here today with the leaders of South-East Europe, in this beautiful city of Opatija. Widely known as the Pearl of the Adriatic Sea, Opatija is a delightful setting for this important Regional Summit.

At the outset, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to President Stjepan Mesic of Croatia for hosting this event, whose theme is "Communication of Heritage: A New Vision of South-East Europe". Let me commend the hosts and organizers of this summit for the excellent arrangements and for the constructive collaboration over the past weeks and months.

This is the fourth summit in a series where UNESCO has been privileged to cooperate closely with the leaders of all countries present and with the Council of Europe and representatives of other European organizations. The earnest commitment to increased cooperation through genuine dialogue has grown steadily over recent years, from our meeting in Ohrid in 2003, in Tirana in 2004, and in Varna last year - and now to Opatija. This process has succeeded in reinforcing positive linkages and exchanges, including with European institutions and UNESCO.

This fourth Regional Forum at summit level has again been designed under the overarching umbrella of promoting dialogue among all countries of the sub-region and of advancing cooperation and mutual understanding through dialogue in concrete ways.

Last year, in Varna, the recognition of the important role played by culture in the new common space for dialogue, exchange and understanding in South-East Europe was clearly recognized. Among other things, the Varna Declaration drew special attention to the existence of a unique network of cultural corridors and cultural routes in South-East Europe, which deserve to be identified, preserved and promoted within a long-term, sustainable strategy and frame of action. Here in Opatija, we will be called to consolidate the accomplishments of the Varna Summit and to build on the milestone represented by the Varna Strategy.

The Opatija Summit takes the agenda one step further. It provides an exceptional opportunity to examine key features of these cultural corridors - in particular, the fundamental role played by cultural heritage in the development of South-East Europe, along with its promotion, safeguarding and transmission through specific approaches. In this era of accelerated interaction facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs), it has become important to systematically promote knowledge about heritage and to foster a sense of shared responsibility towards its preservation and safeguarding - hence, the theme of this summit: "Communication of Heritage".

The potential of enhanced regional cooperation through a shared vision of its heritage - be it tangible or intangible - is enormous. At present, 59 cultural and natural properties from South-East Europe are inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List and nearly 100 sites have been identified on national tentative lists that may be nominated in future. Increased cooperation and communication clearly can enhance conservation practices, establish links between heritage sites across the region, and raise public awareness of the diversity and shared history of this heritage.

The Republic of Croatia has spared no efforts in this regard. The country can take pride not only in its outstanding cultural and natural heritage but also in the important protective measures that have been enacted. Since its ratification of the 1972 Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage in July 1992, Croatia has actively participated in its implementation. Today, the country has six sites inscribed on the World Heritage List - five cultural and one natural - and 5 more on the Tentative List, which shows its great potential in this matter, something it shares with all the countries in South-East Europe.

The constant efforts to enhance international collaboration in this domain are exemplified by the Old City of Dubrovnik, which has been the focus of a major restoration programme involving UNESCO and other European partners, as well as by the beautiful Plitvice Lakes.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in October 2003, has been ratified at an exceptionally rapid pace in all regions of the world, but nowhere as extensively as in Eastern Europe. The following States in South-East Europe already are party to this Convention: Croatia, Romania, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Hungary, Turkey and Albania. The Convention entered into force in April of this year, and very soon the General Assembly of this Convention, and the Intergovernmental Committee it will elect, will start implementing it. I am sure that these organs will profit greatly from the experience and research available from this sub-region. Furthermore, I am certain that living cultural practices and expressions will form part and parcel of the heritage that will be communicated and shared through cultural corridors, high-level heritage-related research and new technologies. The recognition of the function and values of the intangible heritage in the spirit of the new Convention is not only linked to tangible heritage but also serves as a stable factor for the sense of identity and continuity of communities. This recognition will help to develop corridors and programmes that promote dialogue, exchange and understanding between communities and peoples all over the region.

Indeed, heritage can be an important driving force for regional and local development. Natural and cultural heritage sites and the various manifestations of cultural diversity and of living cultures are major tourism attractions, reflecting the inherent link between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Cultural tourism is among the foremost vehicles of mutual knowledge and cultural exchange. Cultural industries, which combine the creation, production and commercialization of contents, also communicate identities and heritage as well as generate income and improved livelihoods for local populations.

Furthermore, interaction between tourism and heritage often results in the interpretation and re-interpretation of heritage, which involves important educational dynamics. The significance of heritage education in regions that have recently suffered from conflicts and wars cannot be underestimated. Successful initiatives such as UNESCO's "World Heritage in Young Hands" merit attention in the South-East European context, especially because of its focus on heritage as a common denominator and unifying factor for cooperation and reconciliation.

The promotion of innovative techniques in restoration and preservation is channeled through capacity-building, networking and the dissemination of best practices and expertise; in this regard, there is an important role to be played by organizations such as UNESCO, the European Union, the Council of Europe and ICCROM. Information and communication technologies obviously play a key role in promoting cultural heritage as they facilitate and

enrich the exchange of knowledge on heritage, both among experts and among the public at large. Through digitization, these technologies help to keep heritage accessible as a living part of contemporary culture and to maintain cyberspace culturally and linguistically diverse.

“Communication of Heritage” clearly points to several domains and different types of expertise in a creative and dynamic process. Obtaining concrete and tangible results will require a firm commitment to the principles of dialogue and commonly shared values - mutual respect, tolerance and willingness to listen to and learn from each other. It is worth recalling that our cultural diversity is, as the UNESCO Universal Declaration (2001) puts it, *the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations*”.

The High-Level Conference on Strengthening Cooperation in South-East Europe held at UNESCO Headquarters in 2002, along with subsequent important developments, events and Summit gatherings have clearly illustrated the growing understanding of the need for intensified “Communication of Heritage”. In this perspective, the many efforts presently being undertaken by many countries in the region and by the international community represent a new beginning. The challenge of the Opatija Summit is to bring all the strands, perspectives and approaches together with the aim of formulating a clear strategy and a sustainable action plan for the future. The tangible proof of our efforts will then lie in the practical translation of the Strategy into concrete action at the level of each country and through various cooperative efforts.

Let me assure you that UNESCO stands ready to continue its support to this process as a genuine partner and stakeholder with a view to consolidating peace, stability and prosperity in the region for the benefit of its peoples.

Thank you.