

MESSAGE FROM OHRID

ADOPTED BY THE REGIONAL FORUM ON THE DIALOGUE AMONG
CIVILISATIONS
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We, the participants in the Ohrid Regional Forum on the Dialogue among Civilisations – led by eight Heads of State of South-East Europe -, commit ourselves to a culture of dialogue, tolerance and peace in order to advance the prosperity, well-being and mutual cooperation among the peoples and countries of the South-East Europe region.

The region, which is the cradle of European culture and civilization, has witnessed wars, destruction, and ethnic cleansing, not least over the past decade. Fear of the Other was always a step towards hatred and conflict. Now, a new era is dawning where dialogue, understanding and reconciliation are poised to replace the tribulations of history and where unity can be found in and nourished through the rich diversity and humanity of the peoples. Forgiveness will help rid the region from the biases and ignorance of the past. A new generation of democratically elected leaders in the region promises a more peaceful future given their dedication to dialogue and genuine cooperation.

We are determined to demonstrate that the region can turn itself, through its own strategies and effective means of dialogue and engagement, into a vibrant space where people can jointly rediscover the stimulating wealth of differences, cultural exchanges and interaction as well as their multiple identities. The recognition of *multiple identities* of each individual is indeed a precondition for a constructive, practical and forward-looking dialogue apt to deepen and intensify the process of regional cooperation and stability.

The peoples of South-East Europe know how to live together, cooperate and exchange their precious knowledge with a view to solidifying freedom and democracy and upholding human rights. Free societies can be created only upon the existence of free individuals, who are sovereign in choosing their political status and in following their own economic, social and cultural development. Only under such circumstances can spirituality, religion, cultural and civilisational affiliation fully develop, whereby people can live together in harmony and in the pursuit of prosperity.

The Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilisations, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 2001, sets forth a useful framework for action by States, international and regional organizations, civil society and the private sector. It also calls for interaction and dialogue among individuals and institutions in the spirit of inclusion and a collective desire to learn and to

question assumptions. Such dialogue occurs at local, national, regional and international levels.

There are no superior or inferior civilizations. Neither are there superior or inferior races, languages and religions. We stress the equality of each cultural tradition and recognize the value of each civilizing experience as an invaluable and integral part of the commonly shared human experience. Cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indeed, diversity is not a threat.

We are convinced that dialogue represents a new paradigm of security, especially in a globalizing world with its manifold new challenges to individuals, communities and countries. A commitment to dialogue among civilizations is also a commitment against terrorism. Pursuing reconciliation and seeking security through dialogue requires a dynamic and pro-active civil society. It necessitates a mobilization of political leaders, parliamentarians, scholars, spiritual and religious leaders, media and non-governmental organizations as well as women and youth who all must play their roles and assume their responsibilities.

We believe in an active role of the private sector in promoting economic development of the region, which in turn contributes to its stability. The international business community is called upon to engage itself in activities reflecting its corporate social responsibility. In this respect, we are encouraged by ongoing initiatives launched by the private sector.

We therefore consider it of paramount importance to work with vigor towards dialogue and cooperation in all spheres of life through joint projects in education, scientific cooperation, cultural heritage as well as media and communications. The dialogue of the future necessitates transformation from verbal commitment into moral action through a range of practical projects, building on the action taken since the High-level Conference on Strengthening Cooperation in South-East Europe (Paris, April 2002) convened by UNESCO.

Peace and security in the region are of utmost importance for its stability and prosperity based on a continuing dialogue, regional cooperation and integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Education remains the most fundamental basis for promoting tolerance, understanding, dialogue, respect for diversity, human rights and democratic principles. These values and dimensions together make up what is called “quality education”, which often entails a revision of school curricula and textbooks – and should build upon initiatives already undertaken by some countries in the region to eliminate stereotypes and misrepresentations of other cultures and identities.

Mutual respect of traditions and people will be possible when the matrix of values and the underlying spiritual and ethical foundations can influence education systems in different societies. We are conscious of the positive role that religion should play in this regard.

Fostering cooperation in higher education needs therefore to comprise support to a new generation of teachers and policy-makers of modern education. Education for pluralism can thus become a solid partner of political action for pluralism.

Development is a key question for the region. In that regard, *scientific and technological cooperation* is an important domain where progress can and must be made, in particular through the rebuilding of scientific networks and infrastructures and the building of competent institutional capacities and human resources in different disciplines.

The Ohrid Forum welcomes the proposal and offer by President Boris Trajkovski to convene and host in mid-2004 a conference of Ministers of Education and Science with the purpose of developing criteria for a universal network that could provide through education a continued development and promotion of dialogue among civilizations throughout the region and with the participation of experts from other regions.

The challenge for South East European countries lies in associating *cultural heritage* with development policies and demonstrating how much this powerful symbol of a people's identity can become a unifying force for national and regional reconciliation. This may well serve as a foundation for a shared future.

Once respect for cultural heritage allows people to understand themselves, it will also be a key to understand others. 54 cultural and natural sites from the region are currently inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage List, which attests to an enormous cultural richness and diversity. It is therefore imperative to develop a culture of conservation and preservation. This will help avoid that cultural heritage becomes a symbolic target of aggression and intentional destruction. The Ohrid Forum therefore endorses the adoption of a Declaration against the intentional destruction of cultural heritage, as proposed by the UNESCO Director-General, which is before the 32nd session of UNESCO's General Conference.

The Ohrid Forum welcomes the project *Cultural Routes in Southeast Europe* and endorses the proposal and offer by President Georgi Parvanov to convene and host in 2004 a meeting of Heads of State of all countries of South-East Europe to be devoted to the rich cultural and historical heritage of the region.

The Ohrid Forum equally endorses the suggestion by Chairman Dragan Covic that the Mostar Bridge be reopened in 2004 in the presence of the Heads of State of the region.

Channels of *communication* must remain open and flexible in order to allow fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among people. The new era of information society requires new generations with solid skills in information technology, which today plays an important role in bringing cultures and people together. The use of new techniques such as e-learning and distance education is contributing to wider access to knowledge and information. Educational systems need to be adapted to create a new computer-literate generation.

The *media* are called to play a particularly crucial role in helping tear down barriers in the minds of people. Strengthening independent media and its professionalism, upholding freedom of the press and of expression, and promoting the right of access to information and knowledge are major challenges for South-East Europe. Apart from serving as channels of information, the media constitute also forceful instruments through which new identities can be constructed and mediated.

Our common task transcends the need to rebuild the region and bolster its confidence, competence and trust after a period of conflict, as we move to a common and newly enlarged and united Europe. Civilizations and cultures will mutually enrich themselves and help shape a new world where justice, equal development and eliminating poverty will curb possibilities for future conflicts.

During the Ohrid Forum three panels developed recommendations on the themes of “Peace and Stability”, “Democracy and Civil Society” and “Culture and Diversity”. The results of their deliberations will be a valuable input for concrete action in the future.

We express our sincere appreciation to President Boris Trajkovski, the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, and Rabbi Arthur Schneier and the Appeal of Conscience Foundation for having convened this important Forum. Our gratitude also goes to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Hon. Kofi Annan, for his support and encouragement and for the participation of his Personal Representative for the Dialogue among Civilisations. We equally appreciate the participation of DaimlerChrysler and Siemens and their valuable contributions to the Forum, along with those of the Governments of Austria, Liechtenstein, Norway, Qatar and San Marino, of UNESCO, UNDP, the United Nations, the European Union and the Appeal of Conscience Foundation.

Drawing lessons from history, we agree that reconciliation is the path for our common future. Dialogue must become a new refrain that will echo throughout the region and the world at large.