



UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND
CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Check against delivery

Address by

Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General

of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural
Organization
(UNESCO)

On the occasion of the Regional Forum on "The cultural corridors of
South-East Europe: common past and shared heritage, a key to future
partnership"



Varna, Bulgaria, 20-21 May 2005

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today in Varna for this Summit, which represents a new opportunity to strengthen the cooperation we have sought to build up with the Heads of State of the region in order to create a genuine platform for dialogue among the cultures and civilizations of South-East Europe.

The high-level encounter on the strengthening of cooperation in South-East Europe that took place at UNESCO Headquarters in April 2002 was undoubtedly the starting point for renewed dialogue among the countries of the region. Since then, this dialogue has been pursued most fruitfully, first in Ohrid in 2003 and then in Tirana last year. I am very pleased with the progress that has been achieved over the last three years. I should like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all Heads of State of the region, and especially those present here today who, by their regular attendance at these Summits, have shown how much importance they assign to this process.

I believe that the dialogue has now been placed on a sound and lasting footing and that the time has now come to anchor it in more practical and targeted actions, and to think about launching a series of annual meetings on specific issues that can solidify the dialogue around unifying themes.

This is one of the reasons why I so readily concurred with the proposal of our host, President Georgi Parvanov, to give concrete extension to our previous encounters by including on the political agenda of the Heads of State a project based on cultural cooperation and devoted, by definition, to dialogue.

I am especially glad that at this decisive stage we are able to benefit from the support of regional cooperation organizations, particularly the Council of Europe and the European Commission. The project that brings us together, if it is to succeed, indeed demands a steadfast commitment to cooperation and to the sharing of expertise and resources.

Today, the Heads of State of South-East Europe are assembled not only to issue a strong reaffirmation of their determination to cooperate in peace and dialogue - as they did in Ohrid and Tirana - but also to sign up to a concrete programme that places culture at the heart of development and dialogue.

This is moment of historic significance for UNESCO - which has always argued that culture had a pivotal role in international relations - since, today, it is Heads of State who are declaring before the world their support for this approach and thus giving it exemplary importance and impact. I am confident that the Varna process will be contagious in the most beneficial sense of the word. For we are living in times when each and every one of us is becoming aware of the increasing role of culture in the daily lives of peoples and individuals as a mirror of their identity. As a result, by not only reaching into every nook and cranny of daily life but also becoming an increasingly central feature of international relations, culture is generating a new geopolitical strategy or paradigm.

Your engagement is forcefully inscribing upon the political agenda a development that is here for all to see and that is gathering momentum in the age of globalization. You have understood the awesome power of culture, which can be divisive if used badly, or a tool for peace and progress when placed in the service of mutual understanding.

I am also very pleased to see that this Varna meeting coincides with the World Day of Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2002. It is particularly appropriate that this symbolic coincidence is occurring in a region with such extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, something that has long been a source of vulnerability for it, but which today is among its strengths.

The promotion of the "fruitful diversity of cultures" is enshrined in UNESCO's Constitution as one of its core mandates. This involves the recognition of the equal dignity of each culture and the mobilization of all cultures' energies in the service of future-oriented projects.

As is the case in any region that has a rich history, memory is a bridge between past and future, based on the traces of a remarkably varied heritage, each part of which is an

indispensable building block for a self-respecting society. Heritage is not the result of the slow sedimentation of successive cultures and civilizations in a given location. Nor is it the fruit of a selective reading of history whereby certain periods would fall into oblivion while others would be highlighted simply because they were considered more glorious or productive. Heritage is the daily encounter with the past and the discovery of a key that opens the doors to a full understanding of today's world, thereby shaping a clearer vision of the future. Heritage should not be taken as meaning a collection of cultural landscapes, sites, monuments or objects. It is not confined to these material components, however valuable they may be.

Heritage also stands for such practices, representations, expressions, and forms of knowledge and know-how - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with them - as communities, groups or individuals recognize as belonging to their cultural heritage. This intangible heritage, handed down from generation to generation, is in a perpetual state of re-creation by those communities and groups in accordance with their *milieu*, their interaction with nature and their history, and it gives them a sense of identity and continuity, thus contributing to the promotion of respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

UNESCO has sought strongly to affirm the multi-faceted value of heritage, adopting the World Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972 and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. It is gratifying for UNESCO to observe that the complementarity of these two Conventions is today widely recognised and that heritage protection, whether in the tangible or intangible domain, is in demand the world over.

Accordingly, there is a growing public outcry whenever one of the treasures of humanity's heritage disappears, be it as a result of natural disaster, war or some other cause. It is this watchful universal awareness that will in future guarantee the survival of our heritage on the international, regional, national or local levels. But it will only work if each of us recognizes that another person's heritage is also a part of our own and of that of humankind in its entirety.

Where regions are concerned, it should by rights be even easier to build up regional awareness through a closer and more detailed knowledge of neighbouring cultures. And yet the paradox is that this is not always the case, with the wounds of strife clouding our memory or effacing whole segments of it.

This is the type of situation where the "Routes" or "Cultural Itineraries" approach can point to a way forward, by revealing riches that others do not know exist - even though, locally, they have been revered since time immemorial. The concept of a "Route" is based on the observation that encounters among peoples and among cultures are beneficial. It highlights the cross-fertilization of knowledge and know-how, of ideas, beliefs and representations by integrating the fundamental data of the natural and cultural, tangible and intangible heritage. It identifies the dynamics that, in times of crisis and in times of well-being, have set these interactions in motion. In addition, on the basis of an analysis over time, it makes for a better assessment of the potential and the modalities for intercultural dialogue in today's pluralistic societies, while at the same time avoiding a return to past disagreements that could once again be our downfall. The Routes not only offer a history and geography of intercultural dialogue down through the ages, but also contribute to forward-looking reflection. Indeed, the encounters and interactions that today's world tends to overlook are actually a stark reminder to us that intercultural processes were happening long before we started discussing them.

In South-East Europe, long referred to as the "Balkans" - a word that means "mountain" in Turkish - it is easy to appreciate that, except for a few major Routes such as the "Via Egnatia", the routes make up a maze of corridors that are scattered and unconnected. This concept of "cultural corridors", coined in 1974 by Rezvan Theodorescu, is the expression of a reality that is particular to this region where, as Herder put it in his famous aphorism: "history is but geography on the move".

Each of these corridors has its own specificities, born out of the meeting of remote or neighbouring cultures in an environment generally disinclined to exchange and sharing. Each of them therefore represents an opportunity to open up new horizons for mutual understanding, thanks to a broader vision of cultural heritage.

Out of the secrets of past encounters that occurred spontaneously but sporadically, we should now seek to discover an alchemy of encounter that could be of benefit to the entire region of South-East Europe.

I have no doubt that the Summit of Varna is set to transform the corridors of yesteryear into the primary axes of tomorrow's intercultural communication. While I do not wish to dwell on the detailed modalities for such a strategy, some key ideas are contained in the document prepared by UNESCO and sent to you a few days ago by President Parvanov in an attachment to the Draft Statement, in order to provide clearer insights into the issues to be covered at this Summit.

Allow me to assure the Heads of State that UNESCO stands ready to support them without fail in the pursuit of this fine project, whose appeal is more than a passing enticement, but a renewed invitation to enduring dialogue.

Thank you.