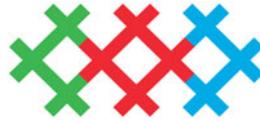


**DISCUSSION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
AT THE REGIONAL FORUM ON
CULTURAL CORRIDORS OF SOUTH-EAST EUROPE**



(Varna, 20 May 2005)

Dear President Parvanov
Distinguished Presidents from South East Europe
Esteemed highest representatives of UNESCO and the Council of Europe
Ladies and gentlemen

I would first like to express my satisfaction with our ever more frequent meetings within the framework of South-East European states. It gives me special pleasure that we no longer meet only on the basis of incentives coming from "outside" but rather on the basis of our own regional initiatives. I consider it important that we have gathered today guided by a topic that links our past and our common future.

We are witnesses of a not only historical but rather a millennial project — the European integration. This is a Europe where not the length of mutual borders but rather cross-border co-operation will be evaluated, a Europe where one should not be afraid of a majority people, a Europe where diversities are not lost but get mutually connected. I think that this is an extraordinary opportunity for us not to be mere passive witnesses but rather participants in this project.

I am happy that we can deal with this in an entirely different climate from that recorded by the history of the region. Always when differences were spoken about intolerance spread in these areas. Hatred spread instead of dialogue. Talks on culture, language and identity were frequently only a prelude into events that wrote some of the darkest pages in our history.

Therefore, I welcome the initiative of our host, the support of UNESCO and the Council of Europe, the fact that Presidents from the region accepted the invitation to this Forum as well as co-operation and contribution given by experts from all the states of Southeast Europe. I am confident that we have gathered here guided by the ideas of co-operation, understanding and respect.

I think that we, Presidents of South-East European states, and in particular of countries that have not yet become full-fledged members have to have the courage to face up to mistakes of the past so that they not be left to the future generations. I think that the conflict in these areas was not a clash of cultures or civilizations - as many wanted to interpret it. This was a clash of policies of exclusion, intolerance, policies that only lead to isolation. I think that we all must be aware of this, both in this region and in the total international relations.

Because of this the project of cultural corridors has exceptional significance. Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is universal wealth of humanity. However, since cultural heritage is one of the key elements for defining cultural identities, it is not seldom abused for erection of walls rather than bridges among cultures, which is something on the basis of which intercultural dialogue, understanding and co-operation should be constructed.

We are witnessing the disappearance of many languages, traditional cultures and customs that were nurtured by generations and that are deeply connected with the term "sustainability". Cultural heritage throughout the world is exposed to decay. War destruction and decades of socialism left their imprint not only on Croatian heritage. In spite of the care of the profession, "heritage without heirs" was left to decay in beauty - as the great English aesthetician Ruskin used to say. Today, we are however faced with the new challenge of an accelerated development that treats heritage very frequently as any other goods.

Because of this, it is of utmost importance to mobilise international solidarity and co-operation in the preservation, protection and promotion of cultural heritage and to adopt a number of measures at the national and local levels.

The project of cultural corridors in South-East Europe is based on the principles of development and diversity. That project, first of all means, to raise awareness and level of knowledge about cultures of South-East Europe in the context of European integration but also to protect and promote heritage as a resource of economic development of countries of the region. Cultural corridors do not represent static preservation of heritage but assume the processes of exchange, openness, co-operation as well as of education aimed at familiarising with and understanding other cultures.

From political angle, I would once again like to stress the importance of minority identity, minority culture and minority links because both in this region and in a united Europe each of us makes a minority. Due to this, it would be useful if this project contains as many such traits as possible.

Richness in diversity represents a special value of Croatian heritage and because of this we are interested in the project of cultural corridors in which we see the possibility to promote dialogue in which each culture preserves its specific quality, its identity, expresses its diversity as well as its tolerance towards other cultures.

Finally, I think that the best support to this initiative consists in our interest to further develop this co-operation which we started several years ago in Paris, continued in Ohrid and Tirana, and reinforced today in Varna. For this reason, I propose that after a dialogue among civilisations we started our meetings with, after inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, we expand our regional co-operation towards the field of science at our next gathering. I believe that in this we shall find support of UNESCO and European institutions. However, above all, this dialogue will be in the first place in our own interests, as well as that of our experts and our public. In this regard, I propose that our next meeting be held in Croatia.

Thank you!