



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

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Alliance of Civilizations' Regional
Conference for South-East Europe

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Mr. High Representative of the UN Secretary-General, President Jorge Sampaio,
Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first warmly thank our hosts, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Sven Alkalaj, and the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr Jorge Sampaio, for inviting UNESCO to contribute to today's discussions. Mrs. Irina Bokova, who has taken over the reigns as the first female Director-General of UNESCO almost to the day since four weeks ago, is sending her best regards and wishes for success of this Conference.

Let me also congratulate you on the choice of Sarajevo as the location for this meeting. As the theatre of the longest siege in modern history, it is a highly symbolic choice; especially for UNESCO, which worked hard to safeguard the cultural heritage and maintain independent media through those difficult years. Today, we can rejoice in celebrating contemporary Sarajevo as a model of a multicultural city.

The subject before us, intercultural dialogue and cooperation, is deeply entrenched in UNESCO's Constitution, which assigns to it the task of building "the defences of peace in the minds of men" through international cooperation in education, the sciences, culture and communication.

This has been UNESCO's guiding light for over sixty years, as the Organization has worked to create an enabling environment that allows people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds to live side by side, in peace.

Over the past six decades, UNESCO has readily accepted and discharged global leadership in this field – beginning with the East-West Major project; the Silk Roads and Slave Route projects; and then the Dialogue among Civilizations with the dedicated year 2001 proclaimed by the UN General Assembly. In October, we published the World Report entitled 'Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue', distributed here. Most recently, the UN General Assembly designated UNESCO as UN system lead agency for the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, 2010.

It is in this spirit that I want to congratulate the Alliance of Civilizations on its fresh approach to developing innovative and effective mechanisms for cooperation. UNESCO is collaborating with the AoC under a Memorandum of Understanding that identifies a number of areas of common interest, such as developing educational content that promotes dialogue; intensifying intercultural exchanges among youth; enhancing the role of the media in promoting dialogue and tolerance; as well as reaching out to new audiences. My colleagues who participate later today in the workshops of this Conference will share with you our experience and lessons learned, especially in the areas of education and culture. We would have also been ready to engage on the central issue of the media where UNESCO has a unique expertise, but unfortunately this issue is no longer on the agenda.

UNESCO acquired a huge amount of experience which has influenced both the international and national policy discourse and country-level operations and initiatives. At the national level, UNESCO has worked, to the extent possible, directly with UN country teams to ensure full alignment with national priorities as defined by the countries concerned and coherence of action of all UN organizations.

Today, I want in particular to highlight the efforts UNESCO has made in the South East Europe region at the highest political level. I humbly suggest that UNESCO has become a trusted and sought-after partner to instil dialogue and cooperation in a region torn apart by civil strife and war not so very long ago. While these summits covered a host of critical areas ranging from education – UNESCO's priority of priorities - to the role of the media, the pride of place has been assigned to culture and cultural heritage - a topic not usually addressed by Heads of State. Yet, we have succeeded to make tangible progress and the lessons learned are very relevant for developing a strategy for this or any other region that has undergone similar turmoil.

Through a process that originated at a High-Level Conference on strengthening co-operation in South-East Europe, held at UNESCO in 2002, seven annual Summits of the Region's Heads of State have since given rise to concrete measures for regional co-operation. They constitute an exemplary record of vision, political will and commitment to act, whether in the field of values education; enhancing scientific exchange; fostering respect for religious and cultural pluralism, or the overarching importance of communication for building a region free of ethnic, religious or cultural divisions. Indeed, the Summit held in Tirana, Albania, in 2004, defined, for the first time, the contribution of inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue to the broader dialogue agenda – with a clear focus on UNESCO's fields of expertise. Perhaps even more significantly, these summits – and the annual meetings of the

Region's Ministers of Culture - testify to the power of culture and cultural heritage to bring together stakeholders when other fora have failed. The rebuilding of the highly symbolic Mostar Bridge here in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an eloquent illustration of this proposition. Cultural heritage can very well serve as a symbol and tool of reconciliation. A brief strategy note on UNESCO's efforts in this regard has been distributed to you. I am happy to note that the Council of Europe, also present here, was our close partner in the series of South East-Europe summits.

The new Director-General of UNESCO, Mrs. Irina Bokova, hailing from this region, has highlighted in her acceptance speech a few weeks ago the central importance of a culture of peace and her determination to build new bridges of dialogue in response to the challenges brought about by globalization and the financial, environmental and social crises of recent years.

UNESCO will continue to play a central role in building a culture of peace. Our Member States expect it. But UNESCO cannot work in isolation. That is why our partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations is so important. Indeed, UNESCO's leadership of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures will allow it to strengthen partnerships with other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that share our values and our commitment to demonstrating the power of dialogue.

Shortly, the Director-General will establish a High Panel on Peace and Intercultural Dialogue. Composed of eminent decision-makers, intellectuals and artistic personalities from all regions of the world, this Panel will work with UNESCO in furthering the debate on culture, tolerance, reconciliation and mutual understanding in all regions. The members of this Panel shall be announced early in the New Year, when the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures will be formally launched.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's meeting in Sarajevo is of central importance for reinforcing the positive results of dialogue in a region afflicted by tragedy and strife. We must all, in our respective areas, join efforts to advance dialogue and concrete action. UNESCO is ready to collaborate with you and I hope that when UNESCO will co-organize with Turkey the next Regional Summit of Heads of State in June 2010, we will also benefit from your reflections here in Sarajevo.

Thank you for your attention.