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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Irina Bokova,

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**on the occasion of the Eighth Ministerial Conference on Cultural heritage
in South-East Europe**

Sofia, 25 October 2012

Excellency Minister of Culture Vezhdi Rashidov,

Ministers, Excellencies, Heads of Delegations,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here, in Sofia, in my home country, to open the *Eighth Ministerial Conference on Cultural Heritage in South-Eastern Europe*.

History has made this region a crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

This is reflected in the centre of Sofia, where four temples of different religions – Islam, Judaism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy -- stand peacefully together, surrounded by the archaeological monuments of ancient civilizations.

The shared belonging that exists across this region arises from buildings and stones – it comes also from our intangible cultural heritage, from our traditions, dance and music, from the crafts.

The importance of intangible cultural heritage has been under the spotlights recently.

In Athens last May, countries of South East Europe gathered to strengthen their shared vision of intangible cultural heritage.

A few months ago, I had the privilege to inaugurate in Sofia with Minister Vezdhi Rashidov the first *UNESCO Regional Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in South-Eastern Europe*.

This Centre is part of a comprehensive network in the region, created with UNESCO's support – including the *International Centre for Underwater Archaeology* in Zadar, the *Tirana Regional Centre on the Restoration of Cultural Heritage* and the *Regional Centre on Digitisation of Cultural Heritage* in Skopje.

This network is a unique tool to strengthen national policies and foster regional cooperation.

It is also a major contribution to the region's European integration, with Croatia joining the European Union next year.

As the President of Bulgaria, Mr. Rosen Plevneliev, declared to the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly:

“Building regional cooperation is of direct benefit to all countries of the region and their European perspective. All South East Europe countries are interested in developing transborder projects as part of the pan-European networks.”

This has also been UNESCO's commitment since 2004, when the first annual Ministerial Conference on Cultural Heritage in South-East Europe was held in Mostar.

My message today is that UNESCO remains ever more committed to advancing this region's goals in culture, and also education, the sciences, communication and information.

Together, we have come a long way.

The journey has sometimes been difficult, but it has never been so rewarding.

We have built cultural corridors across the region.

More and more countries of South East Europe are joining forces to protect their shared heritage, across borders.

Croatia and Cyprus' proposal to join other countries to safeguard the "Mediterranean diet," already recognized by UNESCO, is but one example.

The recovery and restitution of illicitly trafficked cultural goods in the region highlight a strong political will that exists to move forward together on regional cooperation.

Seven years after the Mostar summit, challenges have evolved and new expectations have risen.

This region has moved from reconciliation and reconstruction to new priorities – to concerns for professional training, for cultural exchanges and policy improvement.

We hear new calls to better integrate culture into sustainable development strategies, to underscore the power of culture to bring sustainability, inclusiveness and resilience to development.

Last year, in Belgrade, I launched a new global initiative -- *Culture: a Bridge to Development*.

Our goal is to create new spaces for exchanges between culture professionals, city planners, artists, civil society.

I am convinced we can build a more integrated cultural space across this region -- to help it thrive on its cultural diversity, to accelerate the sharing of knowledge and ideas.

To take this forward, UNESCO will organize several cultural events on bridges across South East Europe.

The first will occur on the iconic bridge of Edirne, in Turkey, on 24-25 November.

This festival will feature performances and concerts, round-tables, and conferences with city planners on intangible heritage.

I see this focus on bridges as a powerful symbol of unity and mutual understanding across the region.

I see this as an opportunity to highlight the importance of intangible heritage for creativity, social inclusion and social progress.

More and more political leaders understand that culture means jobs, revenues, social inclusiveness, justice and human development.

Across the world, a new creative economy is emerging.

In Asia, India, Indonesia and others have placed culture at the front of their sustainable development agendas.

As a beacon of cultural diversity, South East Europe must play an active role in this global shift.

I know I am preaching to the converted.

The 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* has been overwhelmingly ratified in the region.

Handicraft production... intangible expressions... -- many cultural practices provide social and economic benefits when associated with festivals or tourism-related activities.

People can benefit financially from these cultural assets.

And UNESCO will support them -- by giving them the right tools, by backing effective policies, to ensure local communities are the first beneficiaries.

We now stand at a critical juncture.

As we approach 2015, we must redouble efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals. And culture can lead us there.

We must work also to shape a new global sustainability agenda to follow 2015 – with culture at its heart.

Next year, the UN ECOSOC Annual Meeting will focus on “Science, technology and innovation, and the potential of culture, for sustainable development” for the first time ever – we must make the most of this opportunity.

UNESCO is entrusted to prepare the next *World Creative Economy Report* -- this is another key platform to make our case for integrating culture and development.

In this wider global context, this Ministerial Conference is a chance for the region to speak in a single and loud voice.

To strengthen this voice, I believe we can streamline the region’s existing cultural cooperation platforms -- the Ministerial Conferences on Cultural Heritage, the Council of Ministers of Culture of South East Europe, summits of Heads of State and others...

Let us examine the options and debate these, to move forward together.

I am convinced we can craft more effective forms of convergence, to advance our common objectives.

Cultural heritage is one of the greatest strengths of this region – this is a wealth to be shared with the rest of the world, with all humanity. I would like to mention that we are speaking of the intangible cultural heritage today, however we are also celebrating this year the 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention and it is essential to make the link between different forms of cultural heritage which are an asset for us all.

For this opportunity and its steadfast commitment to intangible cultural heritage, I wish to thank once again the Government of Bulgaria, and I wish you a very fruitful debate and discussion.

Thank you.