

Ján Figel'
Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Launch of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

Dear Prime Minister, dear guests,

Congratulations to the Presidency on organizing the event.

Delighted that the opening of the European Year for intercultural Dialogue coincides with Slovenia taking up the reins of the EU Presidency: this occasion, with a 'new' Member State guiding the European Union, is a joyous reminder that Europe has overcome past tragic and bloody divisions and is intent on determining a peaceful and prosperous future for an enlarged, more diverse Europe but one united in common values and open to the world.

Slovenia's valuable experience of intercultural dialogue in the Adriatic setting will be an undoubted boon in ensuring the success of the European Year

Context – why should intercultural dialogue be high on the European political agenda?

Europe has never been a uniform cultural and religious place in its long history. We have always had to cope with each other; we have learned from each other; regrettably, we have fought each other because of conflicting interests and worldviews. Our diversity is part of our genetic makeup, it is characteristic of Europe, with its long history of migration flows and exchanges within its borders and with the rest of the world.

Diversity and change are among the pillars that buttress the process of European integration. For the past half century, we have been writing a radically new chapter in the history of Europe, and the systematic respect of diversity is one of its distinctive features.

Today, wherever we look, north, south, east or west of Ljubljana, diversity is more and more a familiar part of our lives. As a result of globalisation, demography, migration; of European enlargement and internal mobility, Europe is becoming more mixed. Our cultures, our languages, ethnic groups and religions, are increasingly in daily contact.

We know that this tendency will, if anything, increase. It is part of our world. It is our task to make sure it succeeds.

Building societies that are cohesive; integrating migrants successfully – these are challenges we must meet if we want our citizens, 'new' and 'old', to feel confidence in our cultural diversity.

We must open channels for communicating and for understanding our neighbours, so that our more fluid societies rest on stable, sustainable foundations.

Hence the EU's choice to focus on intercultural dialogue throughout this year, to draw attention to the need to promote dialogue, not only to forge closer links among Europeans and with peoples beyond our borders, but also to face the challenges posed by globalisation. In Europe we are well aware of the challenges the 21st century brings. This lies behind the reforms we are undertaking within the Lisbon strategy – to create a socially inclusive,

peaceful, prosperous Europe. We are putting in place policies that deliver results, so that everyone in our communities can share in such a Europe.

Education, for example: education and training are not only a question of ensuring that people have the right skills in a rapidly changing economy. Education and training mark out the path to social inclusion and active citizenship, which are just as fundamental for our citizens and for cohesive societies. In a world of cultural diversity, of migration, education opens doors. How our education systems deal with diversity is a litmus test of the wellbeing of our societies. We must offer more, so that the doors to employment and active participation in social and cultural life are open, and remain open, for everyone. We cannot afford to leave anyone behind.

We must value diversity in the workplace, as an asset that stimulates innovation, growth and competitiveness. By accepting diversity, valuing people from different backgrounds, we garner the talents of every individual, offering equal opportunities to all, and giving everybody the tools to stay abreast of the tide in a rapidly evolving world.

Our rich cultural heritage provides us with another stage where we can engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue. At home and abroad, culture offers a space for dialogue, for inquiry, for appreciation, for meeting between people who may otherwise think of themselves as separate, as different.

Promoting Europe's cultural plurality, and opening up exposure to the many world and European cultures that live side-by-side in our communities, furthers understanding, respect and solidarity, within and beyond our borders. Our experience as a culturally sustainable society based on respect for diversity is a stabilising force in the world.

Engaging in constructive dialogue with people of different faiths and convictions is a key element of intercultural dialogue. We have seen some recent examples of different faith communities reaching out to each other: it is vital to encourage these positive signs, and not to block overtures either through fear or ignorance.

In conclusion, the Year gives us all an excellent opportunity to put the issue of intercultural dialogue on the table and to raise awareness among citizens, particularly young people. However, this is not a dialogue that ends with the ringing in of the New Year in 2009. The EU's long-term priority is to elaborate a sustainable strategy for the future. For this, Europe and the Member States must continue to address the issue fully, now and over time.

We are firmly resolved to use all tools at our disposal to create a peaceful, multicultural Europe. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, which we have just set up in the neighbouring capital of Vienna, will strengthen Europe in the fight against racism and intolerance. It will reinforce our culture of respect for the rights of every individual, and it will do so working hand in hand with Member States and with civil society.

We must foster a bottom-up culture of dialogue and participation based on mutual knowledge and respect. To make the European Year a real success, the debate on the cultures of Europe and of the world should happen on our doorsteps: our workplaces, our schools, our centres of leisure and culture.

This is surely how we best assist our diverse communities to live, not separate, parallel lives, but 'together in diversity', our common endeavour during the 2008 Year.