



Slovensko predsedstvo EU 2008
Slovenian Presidency of the EU 2008
La Présidence slovène de l'UE 2008

REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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Press release on the International Conference "Intercultural Dialogue as the Fundamental Value of the EU"

Today, the two-day international conference on intercultural dialogue ended with the evening opening ceremony of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue organised by Slovenia as the presiding country of the Council of the EU. The international conference was held at Cankarjev Dom in Ljubljana by the European Commission and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia in co-operation with the University of Primorska. The programme and stage management of the opening ceremony was entrusted to director Barbara Hieng Samobor.

Guests were welcomed by Dr Danilo Türk, President of the Republic of Slovenia, and Mr Jan Figel, European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth. Dr Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament, Dr Edvard Kovač, professor of ethics and cultural anthropology, and Mr Janez Janša, Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia, all made opening speeches.

The purpose of the two-day conference was to present intercultural dialogue as a prerequisite to forming a diverse, yet tolerant society that draws from its diversity, and to show co-operation between different cultures and ethnic identities, between majorities and minorities, including examples of good practice that were presented within the framework of certain of the accompanying activities.

In his opening speech, the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, Mr Jan Figel, congratulated Slovenia as the presiding country of the Council of the EU for organising the opening event. Diversity and change are two pillars of European integration, he stressed. Diversity is becoming more and more a part of our lives. It is a result of globalisation, demographic movements and migration flows. Contacts between our cultures, languages, ethnic groups and religions are increasing. Europe is aware of the challenges of the 21st century. This is reflected in the reform movements of the Lisbon Strategy, the goal of which is to create a Europe of social inclusion, peace and success, an aim which European policies are also trying to achieve. Education and training is the path to social inclusion, and in the world of cultural diversity and migration, education is the key to success. Furthermore, diversity in working environments must also be valued, because it spurs innovation, growth and competitiveness. At home and abroad, culture offers a place for dialogue, curiosity and contact among otherwise different people. The Year of Intercultural Dialogue gives us the opportunity to discuss this issue and to raise awareness among our citizens, especially young people. However, this is not dialogue that will finish when 2008 ends. A long-term EU priority is to prepare a sustainable strategy in this area. Every measure will be used to ensure a peaceful and intercultural Europe, and the newly-established EU Agency for Fundamental Rights will, in co-operation with the Member States and civil society, strengthen its fight against racism and intolerance. The discussion on European cultures must happen on our doorstep: in working environments, schools and cultural institutions. The best way to reach our goal is to be together in diversity.

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The president of the European Parliament, Dr Hans-Gert Pöttering, stressed that by taking over the presidency Slovenia has set three milestones: for the first time, one of the new Member States is holding the EU presidency; it is the first of the former communist countries to take on this task; and finally it is the first predominantly Slavic country to preside over the Council of the EU. He mentioned that Slovenia, because of its unique location between Central Europe and the Western Balkans, can use its understanding of various cultures and nations in the region to decisively facilitate intercultural dialogue. After centuries of war, he said, the people of Europe feel peace, reconciliation and tolerance, and this is the experience that the EU wishes to and must use to serve as a role-model for the entire world and to facilitate intercultural dialogue. He also added that tolerance lies at the heart of intercultural dialogue, which means standing by our viewpoints but also listening and respecting the thoughts of others. We have to highlight, however, our common features, especially human dignity and inalienable human rights. At the end, he expressed his best wishes to the Slovenian Presidency of the Council, and highlighted the ratification of the Lisbon Agreement as a great responsibility of Slovenia and France.

Dr Edvard Kovač, professor of ethics and cultural anthropology, as a representative of civil society, summarised the conclusions of the two-day international conference on intercultural dialogue and explained them to the representatives of European institutions and the presiding state of the Council of the EU who were present. Among the most important conclusions of the four roundtables at the conference, he highlighted the position that artistic beauty does not mean only jewels, but also new harmony and that it expresses a certain unity where clear thought is given its shape. A cultural artefact is an expression the meaning of which can be recognised by all of us, beyond language barriers and the inevitable differences in cultural traditions. He stressed that the Bologna Reform is aimed at the original spirit of the European university and open discussion, where the role of the professor is not only to provide knowledge but also to facilitate creative dialogue with younger generations and other colleagues. Furthermore, he highlighted the fact that without the internal obligation to a free and authentic press, the media can easily fall prey to capital and various centres of power, and that despite their diversity, their mission is to express common fundamental human values. They are the voice of each nation, national minorities and individuals within the wider community. He also noted that because of the free flow of people, goods, capital and services, the unity of the European space can raise new fears of losing individual national identities and envy in social distress. The only solution is to re-evaluate the wealth of cultural diversity that, through intercultural dialogue, can be presented as the enrichment of each national and regional culture and, primarily, as a catalyst of creativity and thus sustainable development. In order to achieve this, the European Union must introduce a fifth freedom along with the existing four, namely the free movement of knowledge. Sustainable development also incorporates friendliness to the environment.

In his opening address, Prime Minister of the RS and President of the Council of the EU Janez Janša highlighted the importance of an in-depth discussion on the importance of culture that must take place within the EU itself as well as with everyone outside its borders. The Prime Minister welcomed the fact that the beginning of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union coincided with the opening of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. It comes, he said, at the moment when the European Union is fulfilling all the conditions for the further strengthening of its economic and political power. Regardless of the important achievements the Union has achieved lately, he thinks this is not enough. "More and more we find that the forefathers of a Unified Europe were right: for the complete success of the project of European integration, the large common market and impressive economic growth will not suffice – we must constantly strengthen the cultural and spiritual dimension of Europe as well," said Prime Minister Janša.



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To this end, the European Union is planning to celebrate the richness of its diverse cultures this year, to highlight creativity and to support projects that facilitate integration, awareness-raising and research of European cultural heritage, asserted Prime Minister Janša, adding that it is from this heritage that the universal values of modern Europe emerged: freedom, fairness, equality, rule of law and the protection of human rights.

"The power of the European Union was always that it respected differences and diversity on the basis of universal human rights and values," stressed the Prime Minister. The year of intercultural dialogue is, according to him, a double opportunity – for Europe to strengthen its belief in itself, in the vital power and mission of its cultures, and to strengthen dialogue with other cultures, to be in contact with them and to overcome prejudice, to grow, and to facilitate mutual enrichment and strengthening. "The path of intercultural dialogue is the path of strengthening the sustainable foundations for peace and prosperity on our planet," concluded Prime Minister Janša.