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President of the European Parliament

Spoštovani gospod predsednik Republike Slovenije, dr. Danilo Türk  
Mr President of the Republic of Slovenia, Dr Danilo Türk,

Spoštovani gospod predsednik Drzavnega zbora, dr. France Cukjati  
Mr President of the Slovenian National Assembly, Dr France Cukjati,

Spoštovani gospod Predsednik Vlade Republike Slovenije, gospod Janez Janša  
Mr President of the European Council, Janez Janša,

Spoštovani gospod Komisar, gospod Ján Figel  
Mr Commissioner, Ján Figel

Dragi gospe in gospodje,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Vesel sem, da sem danes lahko z vami tu v Ljubljani, ko slovesno otvarjamo Leto medkulturnega dialoga. Dovolite, da sedaj nadaljujem v mojem materinem jeziku.

(I am very happy to be with you here today in Ljubljana at the opening of the Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Please allow me now to continue in my mother tongue.)

The opening of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is an important moment for the European Union and for understanding and relations between the peoples of Europe and other cultures and religions.

I am delighted to be able to represent the European Parliament here in Ljubljana and, together with the European Council and the European Commission, to formally open the Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Slovenia's assumption of the EU Council Presidency is significant in three respects: firstly, for the first time one of the accession countries from Central and Eastern Europe has taken over the reins of the European Union; secondly, Slovenia is the first formerly Communist-governed country to perform this role; and, thirdly, this is the first time that a predominantly Slavic country has held the Council Presidency.

By virtue of its understanding of the diverse cultures and identities of the peoples of the region, Slovenia can play a unique role as a link between central Europe and the western Balkans and, by drawing on its experience, lend decisive fresh impetus to the dialogue between cultures.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By declaring 2008 the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the European Union has given clear notice of its ever stronger political commitment to making intercultural issues an integral part of all Union policies.

After centuries of war and violence, we have now experienced peace, reconciliation and tolerance at first hand. On the basis of that experience, the European Union can and will set an example for the world as a whole and foster dialogue between cultures.

The European Parliament attaches great significance to this European year of dialogue between cultures.

The peaceful coexistence of cultures and religions, both in the European Union and in its relations with peoples in all parts of the world, in particular on the other side of the Mediterranean, in the Middle East, is possible and of the utmost importance for our shared future.

Together we must now build an intellectual and cultural bridge over the Mediterranean, a bridge founded on mutual understanding and shared values.

Tolerance is central to intercultural dialogue. Tolerance does not mean indifference. Tolerance means defending one's own views and hearing out others and respecting their convictions.

If it is not possible to accept the other person's views, it is nevertheless necessary to respect them, to exchange ideas peacefully and, whenever possible, to establish a basis for joint action.

We must emphasise the common ground between us, the substance of our shared values, and these include, above all, human dignity and inalienable human rights.

Dialogue involves listening, meeting, understanding, exchanging ideas and, when possible, taking action together. Only the open exchange of ideas between individuals can make for reconciliation and mutual understanding.

Above all, dialogue must be based on truthfulness. Dialogue of this kind demands respect for the dignity, religious convictions and views of every partner, although this should not imply any attempt to smooth over cultural differences between peoples. We must understand peaceful diversity as a source of mutual enrichment and strength.

Over the coming year, through a series of events and initiatives, the European Parliament intends to lend fresh impetus to intercultural dialogue and to offer forums for exchanges of ideas between individuals from different cultures.

We have invited senior political and religious leaders from all over the world, such as President Mahmoud Abbas, President Shimon Peres, John Agyekum Kufuor, the President of Ghana and current President of the African Union, or the Grand Mufti of Damascus, Ahmad Hassoun.

At the same time, we will organise Arab and African cultural weeks and, in May 2008, together with the Commission and Council, host the annual summit of European religious leaders in Brussels.

We will bring together at the European Parliament young people from the Arab countries and Israel, countries with which we are closely involved in the Barcelona Process, and young people from Europe.

However, dialogue between cultures must not come to an end when 2008 does. It must be a continuing task. Each of the 27 Member States should also develop individual forms of dialogue.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With the Middle East and in the Middle East in particular, intercultural dialogue is of the utmost importance. By means of a series of special initiatives, the European Parliament intends to place the focus on the Middle East. The success of the European unification project can also be an inspiration for a region which, in many respects, represents the cradle of our own civilisation.

The people and politicians in the Middle East want a European contribution to the peace process. We can overcome historic divisions by fostering development and by helping the inhabitants of the region to shape their own futures, both by themselves and with other peoples.

Dialogue between cultures is also of vital importance within each individual Member State of the European Union, however. On our European continent, we experience the diversity of cultures and religions as a simple fact of life. Now, however, we must foster a willingness to live together in harmony on a day-to-day basis.

Not least in south-east Europe, fostering understanding and reconciliation is a particularly urgent task. In this respect as well, the Slovenian Council Presidency is very important and offers a great opportunity.

Many States in the region admire Slovenia's success and hope that the next six months will see progress made in the work, started by the Thessaloniki process, of bringing the countries of the region - Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Serbia - closer to accession to the European Union.

European Union membership for the countries of south-east Europe is an important objective for the stability of our continent. However, any progress must take account of both the Copenhagen criteria and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. This will call for a great deal of hard work and patience.

A peaceful solution to the challenge of Kosovo calls for common sense and sound judgment on the part of all those involved. For the European Union, this is a particularly important task for 2008, which we intend to address peacefully with all the parties concerned. Indeed, we have no choice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the European Parliament, I should like to wish the Slovenian Council Presidency every success over the next six months. I hope that your country's dynamism will do much to help the European Union and our continent take a major step forward.

However, many of our objectives can only be achieved if we ratify the Treaty of Lisbon signed on 13 December 2007 by the deadline of 1 January 2009.

In that connection, the Slovenian Presidency, and the subsequent French Presidency, have a major responsibility and a duty to move this process forward.

Whatever happens, we should always remember our shared values, which we emphasised once again by formally proclaiming the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 12 December 2007.

Today we have come together here in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, to breathe genuine life into intercultural dialogue, in the service of peaceful coexistence between peoples in Europe and the world!

Hvala za vaso pozornost.

Thank you very much for your attention.