



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

ADDRESS

BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA JANEZ JANŠA ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING EVENT OF THE EUROPEAN YEAR OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Ljubljana, 8 January 2008

*Citizens of the European Union Member States,
Mr President of the European Parliament,
Mr President of the Republic,
Mr President of the National Assembly,
Madam Vice-President of the European Commission,
Vice-Presidents and Members of the European Commission,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

In Slovenia, we are delighted that the beginning of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue coincides with our Presidency of the Council of the European Union. We think that, for various reasons, it is a well-chosen moment. Three weeks ago, we signed a new reform treaty, the Lisbon Treaty. With this Treaty, the European Union is capable of continuing its historic project of economic and political integration and global competitiveness. In the current term of office of the European Parliament and the European Commission, we have adopted a number of solutions aimed at safeguarding the health of our environment and further bolstering the economic and political strength of the European Union. With the latest enlargement, with millions of new jobs and enhanced prosperity, the European Union's economic and political power has indeed increased considerably.

All these achievements command the respect of our partners and associates worldwide. Nevertheless, we often feel that there is something missing. We are increasingly aware of what was already predicted by the founding fathers of a united Europe: that the total success of the project of European integration requires not only a large single market and impressive economic growth, but also continual strengthening of the cultural and spiritual aspects of the European Union. Or, to quote one of our speakers, Mr Ján Figel', Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, who initially put forward the idea of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, "Europe's single market is a remarkable achievement, one of which we are proud, but now we must strike some kind of balance. For half a century we have been addressing Europe's mind, now it is time to turn to Europe's heart."

The time has come for an in-depth debate on the significance of culture. This debate must be held between those of us who live in the European Union, and also between ourselves and the partners with whom we cooperate in our neighbourhood and in the world. The time has come for us to take a look at ourselves and jointly find answers to the key questions pertaining to the cultural dimension of European integration. According to the old humanist principle, "A person who has no faith in culture has lost faith in humanity." Without this humanist principle, which is part and parcel of Europe's cultural heritage, there is no true European policy.

This year, therefore, the European Union wishes to celebrate the richness of its diverse cultures, to highlight creativity and to support projects that promote integration, European cultural heritage research and raise public awareness. We are aware that it is precisely this heritage which engendered the universal values of modern Europe: freedom, justice, equality, the rule of law and protection of human rights. However, the richness of this heritage is a treasure not only of the past. Each and every generation keeps adding new knowledge, new wisdom and a new face. The face of Europe we are celebrating this evening cannot be the tired face of the Old Continent. Quite the opposite, let it be a new expression of creativity, of seeking answers, of looking for new generations and new achievements in European cultures and the arts. By all those who, within the richness of our traditions, are capable of recognising the source of inspiration and using it to build the Europe of the twenty-first century.

Today, more than ever in past decades, we are aware for various reasons that the EU is united not only by its economy and politics but also by the values of shared memory, culture and creativity. The responsibility of each of us to understand and learn about other cultures arises from this very awareness. Our respect for European values obliges us to turn to our neighbours: to those who wish to join us some day and who can identify with these values, and to all others. In this regard, the results of the last Eurobarometer survey are quite encouraging, showing that as many as three quarters of the citizens of the European Union believe that the presence of people of different ethnic or religious origin can enrich their country's cultural life.

Slovenia is a country – as was already mentioned today – which has stood throughout history at the point where many cultural currents intersect. On Slovenia's territory, Slavic civilisation comes into contact with the Romance and Germanic civilisations, and the Central Europe meets the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean. Indeed, we see this as our opportunity to contribute to the strengthening of intercultural understanding in Europe and beyond. A task force for intercultural dialogue has been established within Slovenia's Centre for European Perspective, focusing particularly on bringing the cultures in our immediate neighbourhood, in the Western Balkans, closer together. Similarly, together with the Russian Federation, we have introduced an initiative to establish a Forum of Slavic Cultures, which, with the entry of five Slavic countries into the European Union, gained new impetus for its mission of enhancing intercultural cooperation.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Mediterranean is – as it was in ancient times – a rich crossroads of cultural identities. Despite the burden of certain historical circumstances, the Mediterranean is an area of the most intensive dialogue between the Christian, Islamic and Jewish worlds. This gave rise to the Slovenian initiative to establish the Euro-Mediterranean University, which has every prospect of becoming a meeting place for young people from the entire Mediterranean as early as this year.

The well-known Mexican writer and poet, Octavio Paz, once wrote, "All cultures are born out of mingling, meetings and clashes. Conversely, civilizations die from isolation." And Primož Trubar, the consolidator of the Slovenian language, whose 500th birthday we celebrate this year, coined a phrase that has been quoted many times in Slovenia: "To stand and withstand." By this, he probably meant that in order to discuss effectively with others, you must first of all know who and what you are yourself. Let these thoughts of the two wise men be our guiding principle.

The strength of the European Union has always resided in its ability to respect differences and diversity, based on universal human rights and values. The EU has been able to do so because it has been familiar with the foundation on which it has been shaped and on which it has grown. Because it has drawn its strength from shared values. Because it has always known what it is and has wished to remain just that. Because it has forged its own identity. The majority of the globalised world finds this European identity appealing because it is optimistic in outlook, because it is open, and because it ranks the freedom of the

individual at the top of the list. Indeed, this is why most young people around the world outside the European Union see it as an attractive place to live a pleasant life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The year of intercultural dialogue just inaugurated offers Europe a twofold opportunity. An opportunity, on the one hand, to strengthen its belief in itself, in its vital force and in the mission of its cultures and, on the other, to intensify dialogue with other cultures and, through contacts with them, overcome prejudice, achieve growth, mutual enrichment and magnanimity. The path of intercultural dialogue is the path of strengthening the most solid foundation for peace and prosperity on our planet.

Thank you.