

## Opening remarks

### Intercultural Cities Conference

Dublin - 6 February

Speech

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Ladies and gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to open this conference, which celebrates and takes stock of the results of the joint initiative of the EU and the Council of Europe, the Intercultural Cities Network.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the Council of Europe and to all those cities (mayors and administrations alike) and experts who supported this project and ensured its success.

It is a project which has provided an excellent opportunity to translate into concrete practice the rich exchange of ideas that animated the 2008 European Year on Intercultural dialogue led by the European Commission.

Moreover, the project will leave a concrete legacy in the form of a guidance tool – "The Intercultural City Step-by-Step" – which has just been published and will help future policymakers who wish to launch similar initiatives.

The high-level interest that this conference has evoked is very encouraging, as is the enthusiasm of the participating cities, which in several cases, such as Italy, Spain, and Ukraine took it upon themselves to create national networks of intercultural cities. That so many actors decided to unite and actively look for synergies in this field bears witness to the fact that intercultural dialogue at city level is widely seen as an issue of major importance in Europe.

Cultural diversity is at the very heart of the European project, and respect for diversity is a precondition for bringing a sense of belonging to a common space, where people can interact with one another on an equal basis. This way of living together and belonging together is much more than – and is very different to – the 'multicultural' model, where cultures and cultural groups simply coexist, and passively tolerate one another.

Everyone here today knows that cultural diversity is a great resource: encountering and experiencing other cultures allows us to look at things from different perspectives and this can in turn lead to new ways of thinking and living, and in a more creative environment. This is why the promotion of cultural diversity is a key aspect of the EU European Capitals of Culture initiative and is central to our strategy for developing the EU cultural and creative sectors.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that cultural diversity may also be a source of tension and social conflict, especially in a context of socio-economic difficulties. In recent years, this has become evident in the issues of integration, the management of migration, and interreligious dialogue, so contentious in our Member States.

Without the appropriate channels of expression, difference can tear communities apart and lead them to extreme levels of particularism which can lead to segregation and, at worst, situations of *de facto* apartheid. Intercultural dialogue and cultural activity can be highly effective antidotes to such a repression of difference, as they allow for peaceful and creative self-expression and for exposure to other ways of life in a non-antagonistic context.

If the European project still exists today it is largely thanks to intercultural dialogue. Thanks to the effort that the citizens of all Member States have made to understand one another over the decades. If this salvific intercultural dialogue was possible in the wake of terrible wars and in a climate of fear and hatred, there is no reason why it should not be possible today.

To this end, together with EU Member States, we are reflecting on how the cultural field might better be used to promote intercultural dialogue. At present, one of the ways we are doing this is via the Open Method of Coordination, through which

experts from the EU's nations exchange good practice in creating common spaces in public arts and cultural institutions, to facilitate exchanges among cultures and between social groups.

But if we are truly to benefit from diversity, in addition to the highly important work being undertaken in the cultural field, much needs to be done to address those challenges linked to integration processes. Figures confirm that the most pressing challenges in this field include:

- low employment levels amongst migrants, especially for women;
- gaps in educational achievement; and
- increasing risk of social exclusion.

And I am sure that these issues will be discussed in depth by the conference's eminent panellists.

I would just like to point out that it is in cities that these integration challenges take on their full dimensions. It is in cities that people come into close contact and can decide to meet across cultural boundaries or to close themselves off and perpetuate traditions in separate, parallel communities.

It is in our cities, then, that the complex task of shaping public spaces in such a way as to enable people from different cultural backgrounds to mix, exchange, and interact for mutual benefit

must truly begin. And what better time is there to start this process than in this European Year of Citizens?

Our cities are surely up to the challenge. Cities and the urban lifestyle they offer are one of Europe's greatest cultural assets. It was thanks to the unique opportunities that towns offer to meet and exchange that European culture could develop as it did. Think of Athens, or Florence or Venice in the Renaissance, or Paris at the end of the 19th century.

What these places, far away in time and space, had in common was a situation of relative political stability and wealth, and the ability to open up to a variety of stimuli from other cultures which, in turn, made them attractive to artists and intellectuals, thus creating a virtuous circle. Perhaps most significantly, they were open places.

The lesson we can draw from the past is that those moments of grace which combine peace, wealth and openness seldom occur spontaneously - it is up to political leaders to pave the way for them. Creating a shared space, where all generations and all groups can express themselves freely and participate actively in the communal life, is what good governance is about. This is what all of us here, managing the *res publica* either at a European, national or local level, have the responsibility to strive for.

As President Barroso said in his speech in Marseille last month, if it is to flourish, Europe is in real need of a new narrative, and intercultural dialogue must have a leading role in any such story. The glue that binds Europe together is not only a shared identity, it is also our acceptance of shared difference and what better way is there to celebrate and truly accept difference than through intercultural dialogue, creative exchanges and cultural activity?

Thank you for your attention.



