



## **BACKGROUND PAPER**

**Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations**

**Ohrid, 29-30 August 2003**

### **The Potential for Dialogue in South-East Europe**

Background Paper

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## 1. Background

The decision to convene a Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations in Ohrid, 8-9 November 2002, under the auspices of the President of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Director-General of UNESCO, was one of the major outcomes of the High-Level Conference on Strengthening Cooperation in South-East Europe, which was held at UNESCO headquarters, on 4 and 5 April 2002.<sup>1</sup>

This Conference, attended by Ministers and senior officials from South-East European countries, representatives of Member States of the European Union and several other Western countries, as well as from important regional and international organizations and institutions, was considered a timely opportunity to deepen cooperation and to support countries of the region in their efforts to integrate the European structures.

The Conference underscored that a period of conflict and human suffering has been followed by the democratic election of governments in all countries of the region, committed to the same shared values and objectives. Emphasis was placed on the fact that countries in the region must continue to rediscover their common heritage of shared values - beyond the diversity of languages, cultures and religions – and that this will require the creation of a common cultural space entailing full participation by civil society. This space will benefit from mutual knowledge and understanding, improved commitment to human rights, tolerance and respect for others, respect for cultural, religious and ethnic pluralism, non-violence and, most importantly - dialogue.

The Conference thus strongly echoed the United Nations definition of the Culture of Peace as “a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations”.<sup>2</sup>

The High-Level Meeting further defined the main priorities for regional cooperation to be pursued within UNESCO’s fields of competence – education, culture, science and communication - emphasizing the importance of developing initiatives and projects aimed at confidence- and capacity-building in these domains. This process should be sustained through intra-regional dialogue and cooperation as well as bilateral and multilateral cooperation among countries of the region, through the full involvement of civil society, and while acknowledging the valuable role to be played by international and regional organizations.

The Ohrid Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations builds on, and further expands, these conclusions. The Forum is part of a wider effort to pursue and deepen UNESCO’s long-standing mandate to enhance dialogues among cultures and civilizations, and to do so in concrete terms, highlighting obstacles to, and benefits from, such dialogue<sup>3</sup>. Recent developments, such as the Ohrid Framework Agreement (16 November 2001) and not least the parliamentary elections on 15 September 2002, make the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia a well-suited venue for this important endeavour.

A pillar of regional harmony in the Balkans, Macedonia lends itself to a trans-national exploration of the dialogue among cultures and civilizations within its constitutive pluralist paradigm. The furthering of mutual respect and tolerance among citizens of different ethnic origin is a principle to be sustained in the development of inter-ethnic relations in the region, where the absence of

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<sup>1</sup> The conference received a proposal for, and supported the convening of, a Regional Forum on “Dialogue among Civilizations”, to be held in Ohrid under the sponsorship of the President of the Republic of Macedonia, H.E. Mr Boris Trajkovski, and the Director-General of UNESCO, H.E. Mr Koïchiro Matsuura. This proposal was included in the conclusions by the Chairperson of the Conference. The proceedings of the Conference have been published in “Cooperation between UNESCO and its South-East European Member States” (UNESCO, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> UN Resolutions A/RES/52/13: “Culture of Peace” and A/RES/53/243: “Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace”.

<sup>3</sup> Document 165 EX/27, paragraphe 9.

powerful, cultural, historical norms of cooperation, or structural incentives to cooperation, have generated conflict, violence, deadlock, and secessionism.

The challenge of the dialogue – and of the capacity to dialogue – is therefore significant in both national and regional terms, in the continuing transition towards stability and human and material prosperity. In particular, it holds a key for countries wishing to establish national harmony whilst at the same time coming to terms with very significant minorities living within their borders.

The Regional Forum coincides with current efforts within UNESCO to render the dialogue among cultures and civilizations more inclusive and participatory, and to link these efforts, especially at the practical level, to the recent adoption of the Universal UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the 31<sup>st</sup> session of UNESCO's General Conference in Paris on 2 November 2001, applying key elements of the Declaration's Plan of Action in each region.

The UN Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, adopted by the General Assembly in November 2001, has further invited UNESCO to continue to encourage and facilitate dialogue among civilizations and formulate ways and means to promote dialogue among civilizations in the activities of the United Nations in various fields.

Set within this broader perspective, the Ohrid Regional Forum will be a test-ground for the proposal, which has achieved increased recognition in recent years:

Cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Cultural pluralism refers to the ways in which different nation-states, civil groups and national and international institutions understand and organize cultural diversity, and it implies a sustained dialogue between meaningful pasts and desirable futures. Thus, cultural pluralism should not be seen as a constraint imposed by historical circumstances or an end in itself, but as an objective, which has been chosen and on whose development it is possible to exert influence. As such, it cannot operate strictly within national boundaries and must profit from the dialogue between societies<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. Broadening the Scope of Dialogue**

UNESCO's long-standing commitment to the dialogue among cultures and civilization's culminated in 2001, the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, as proclaimed by the General Assembly in resolution 53/22 of 4 November 1998, "inviting governments, the United Nations system, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization...to plan and implement appropriate cultural, educational and social programmes to promote the concept of dialogue among civilizations, including through organizing conferences and seminars and disseminating information and scholarly material on the subject".

Subsequent to the General Conference resolution 31 of 17 November 1999, endorsing the terms of proclaiming the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, UNESCO organized a launch event for the Year at United National Headquarters in New York on 5 September 2000, on the eve of the historical Millennium Summit.<sup>5</sup> UNESCO subsequently engaged in initiating, sponsoring, and organizing numerous events, conferences and colloquia on the Dialogue in several parts of the world in accordance with the principles and strategies set out in its own Action Plan for the celebration of the International Year.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The World Culture Report, UNESCO Publishing (2000), Towards a Constructive Pluralism. UNESCO/The Commonwealth Secretariat (2000); The Universal UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Dialogue among Civilizations. The Round Table on the Eve of the United Nations Millennium Summit*. UNESCO Publishing (2001).

<sup>6</sup> 161 EX/INF 14

The Action Plan re-emphasized the principal necessity of defining “civilization” as a universal, plural and non-hierarchical phenomenon, for the simple – yet often neglected – reason that civilizations have always been enriched by contact and exchange with other civilizations, hence always involved in a dynamic process of change and redefinition of “self”. Civilizations are inherently “inter-cultural”. Cultural monologues or cultural fundamentalism, which freeze “the other” as an alien, and as such a potential enemy, run counter to this constitutive feature of human civilization and social organization.

UNESCO’s Action Plan also drew attention to the fact that many of the problems faced by today’s world have arisen as a consequence of differences *within* nations, and that dialogue therefore must begin at home. While globalization is creating new opportunities for cultural exchange, conflicts arising within nation-States have turned out to often involve cultural matters. The Action Plan explicitly stressed that the manner in which diversity is defined and acted upon by governments and civil society determines whether it is to lead to greater overall social creativity, cohesion and inclusion – or to violence and exclusion.

The celebration of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations during 2001 thus highlighted new dimensions of the Dialogue against the growing interdependence of communities, nations, cultures and civilizations, setting the stage for a broader international debate - and a renewed commitment to dialogue at all levels. The multitude of events and the many forward-looking approaches underscored the extent to which the dialogue among civilizations has moved to the centre stage in today’s globalizing world.

The tragic events of the 11 September 2001 spurred a new momentum and even a sense of urgency into these efforts. UNESCO’s General Conference adopted unanimously a resolution (31 C/39), in which it considered that “all acts of terrorism are a denial of the principles and values of the United Nations Charter, the UNESCO Constitution and the UNESCO Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance (1995) and represent an attack against humanity as a whole”. The resolution affirmed, among others, that the Dialogue among Civilizations “constitutes a fundamental challenge based on the unity of mankind and commonly shared values, the recognition of its cultural diversity and the equal dignity of each civilization and each culture”.

The General Conference further agreed that efforts would have to be redoubled, not only to strengthen the knowledge and understanding of the world’s diversity of cultures, but also to reinforce our capacity to accept and accommodate the different “other” and accommodate “the other” in an overall desire to live together. A sense prevailed that there was a renewed need for the dialogue among cultures and civilizations, underlining the lead role that UNESCO must take in reinforcing and working towards a realization of the principles of dialogue.

Against this background, UNESCO is currently intensifying the dialogue among communities, cultures and civilizations, with a view to broadening its scope and increasing its relevance for current challenges through different fora in various regions. This entails reviewing the concept and approaches to “dialogue among civilizations”, soliciting recommendations on new orientations, and assessing the coherence and complementarities between different regional and sub-regional approaches, including a better identification of obstacles to dialogue.

The Ohrid Regional Forum is set within the broader framework of this endeavour.

### **3. Constructing Pluralism Through Dialogue**

The construction of a genuine cultural pluralism supposes the abandonment of intercultural antagonisms and the rise of a shared culture based on the acceptance of diversity. Such an acceptance does not signify a levelling process, or suppressing or ignoring of differences, but the

capacity to transform this diversity, maintained and recognized in its specificity, into an advantage and a factor of individual and collective enrichment.

This view implies that cultural diversity should not simply be tolerated, but fully recognized and integrated into the democratic game plan. The ability to manage cultural pluralism determines the maturing of society and makes the latter evolve from a state of political unawareness to a rational choice of building a democratic society capable of integrating differences. In this sense, cultural pluralism is an opportunity for the future and a motor for the present. It is this potential, which makes it a constructive force.

The primary condition allowing a constructive pluralism, indeed that which embodies all the others, is the achievement or at least the pursuit of a democratic ideal that is defined, in the very broad sense, by the capacity of a society to recognize individual and collective rights and to assure the full participation and representation of every section of society in political and economic life. The construction of pluralism therefore takes place in a context determined by the imperatives linked to respect for human rights and particularly the right of minorities. The defence of cultural rights (or the right to a cultural identity), in particular the right to practice one's religion and to speak one's own language, is inseparable from this general defence of human rights and fundamental liberties.

This reorganization of the political and social scene made possible by the presence of cultural pluralism has its equivalent at an individual level, in so far as contact with different cultures leads to a rethinking of the meaning of personal identity. Identities change, decompose, recompose. There is no unchanging identity; there is no trans-historical permanence in identities. By favouring the emergence of this open and dynamic identity, cultural pluralism makes possible a redefinition of the human being, which avoids rigid compartmentalization and takes account of the multiplicity of life choices and ways of thinking that are open to the individual.

A constructive pluralism thus favours seeking compromise through dialogue, within the framework of contractual relations between majority and minorities in order to arrive, by negotiation, at solutions which are agreeable to all parties. Such dialogue is never likely to end definitively, however. The fluctuating character of intercultural relations, the arising of unforeseen obstacles and the willingness or otherwise of the concerned parties to continue listening to their partners mean that negotiations and dialogue have to remain permanently open.

The acceptance of compromise - in and through dialogue - and the pursuit of a necessarily shifting equilibrium is expressive of the will to construct a certain special form of relationship, which is able to guarantee equitable power-sharing and the participation of all communities in democratic life.

#### **4. The Pluralist Challenge in South East Europe**

The stabilization and rebuilding of the Balkans after a decade of ethnic wars builds upon the commitment to democratic principles, protection of human rights and the rule of law, as well as respect for and protection of minorities. Multi-ethnic democratic states and the development of good neighbourly relations and cooperation are prerequisites for regional peace and stability.

Stated most concisely, pluralists argue that, under critically important conditions of open communications and equality, contact between groups generates mutual understanding and cooperation, not conflict. Contact in shared institutions is not necessarily an agent of cultural assimilation; but sustained contact under conditions of open communications and equality can contribute to the emergence of a shared culture of interaction and cooperation - or what has been termed a "civic culture".

This view suggests that incentives for cooperation can be found *in society itself*, in interests that intersect with and moderate the appeal of ethnic identities. This is the essence of the "cross-cutting cleavages" hypothesis widely cited in political science. "Cross-cutting cleavages" contribute to the

moderation of conflict when they become the basis for political identity, electoral competition, and participation in representative institutions and decision-making processes.

- **Access to information and communication media**

The openness of inter-group contact and communication is therefore an essential element in the pluralist paradigm. For example, it suggests the importance of efforts to overcome segmentation in the realm of communications. From this perspective, efforts to ensure the openness of mass media to inter-group communication are a potentially powerful means by which to begin to construct the social foundations for identities and behaviour that transcend ethnic communities.

The transition in South East Europe from state-controlled media to an information system, which respects press freedom, has been – and remains – a significant challenge. Among others, it implies the adaptation of media legislation and policies to internationally recognized standards of democratic media environment, involving relevant citizen's groups; sensitisation of decision-makers and media professionals on editorial independence – notably in the print media, new agencies, public service broadcasting and community multimedia centres – especially in a context of increased internationalisation of the media and trans-national information flows.

Cultural and linguistic pluralism and the vitality of the various forms of cultural expression should also be encouraged through support to the production and dissemination of media products at the local, national and regional level. Creative endogenous television productions and promotion of the expression of cultural diversity through audiovisual media are equally vital tools for informing and alerting society to the existence of intercultural issues, questions and problems.

Moreover, the production and dissemination at the local, national and sub-regional level of educational, recreational and cultural products that meet the expectations of particular social groups constitute important means of ensuring authentic cultural diversity and promoting cultural pluralism. This requires genuine awareness raising among governmental authorities and professional circles, as well as the promotion of partnerships among the public and private sector and civil society.

Intellectual cooperation and dialogue are key tools for mobilizing the public opinion for the promotion and defence of the freedom of expression and the right to information – which is closely linked to the right to education. The objective is self-evident: anchoring communication at the heart of national democratic processes, increasing diversity and plurality of contents as well as catalyzing development issues.

- **Strengthening democratic citizenship**

Similarly, the pluralist approach suggests that common educational institutions valuing group identities and cultures equally – especially at the university level – are a potentially powerful means of fostering inter-group contact, communication, and understanding, and encouraging the discovery of shared values and interests.

The most radical changes in the educational systems of East-European countries have occurred in the field of higher education. In particular, university autonomy, accountability and quality assurance have been identified as most critical areas in seeking to establish university links with institutions in the West. While some countries in the region have already achieved encouraging results in their educational reforms, there is a basic need to further national and institutional capacities and skills in policy-making, good governance, and the strategic management of higher education institutions, including trans-border mobility among the younger generation of intellectuals.

The need to make systematic educational efforts to strengthen democratic citizenship and respect for human rights is of also paramount importance in South-East European context. As well as the great variety of individual talents, education here has to face the wide range of social, cultural, religious, ethnic and other backgrounds of the groups making up society. Everyone should be

enable to find their place in the community - in most cases local, to which they primarily belong - and at the same time be given the means to open out to other communities, values, belief systems and faiths. Any education policy must therefore be able to meet the challenge of how to turn cultural diversity into something that makes for social cohesion.

This “civic education” is not a matter of cold, intellectual analysis, but an emotional receptiveness to the viewpoint of others, which is the surest means of deconstructing false representations, prejudices and stereotypes associated with each group. To achieve this, dialogue between different communities at work, at play, through the voluntary sector and at neighbourhood levels must be encouraged.

Particular attention must be paid to the way in which the history and development of intercultural relations are presented in the media and schoolbooks of countries, which have participated in acts of violence or crimes. The education system therefore will have to accord the diversity of the cultures a place in study programmes (particularly in the teaching of languages) while at the same time emphasizing the role played by these cultures in the history of ideas and recognizing the contribution of ethnic minorities and immigrant populations in every field of knowledge.

The development of quality education is crucial for the entire endeavour, as the notion of “quality education” does not merely encompass aspects of educational attainment, but especially the aspects of curricula and their content focussing on peace, shared values, human rights, democracy, tolerance and mutual understanding.

Without calling into question the very foundations of the education system, it is thus possible to supporting the reform of curricula and syllabuses and by redefining the scope and content of the different subjects taught. The latter should take greater account of the diversity of cultures and of the need to establish links and paths of dialogue between them. The placing of localized intercultural conflicts in a larger spatial and temporal context allows debate to become less heated and facilitates a calmer negotiation of a way out of the crisis. In this way, education for pluralism becomes a partner of political action for pluralism.

- **Building scientific, technical and human capacities**

The education of each citizen must continue throughout his or her life and become part of the basic framework of civil society and living democracy. It even becomes indistinguishable from democracy when everyone plays a part in constructing a responsible and mutually supportive society that upholds the fundamental rights of all.

At present, the challenges emanating from globalization and from the trends in many areas are becoming ever more complex, often driven by scientific and technological insights and breakthroughs, and they carry manifold implications. Policies to address these challenges increasingly demand scientific advice based on analysis, understanding, sharing and anticipation. More than ever, decision-making and policy formulation require understanding of the scientific underpinnings and consequences must be fully informed as to their scientific underpinnings and consequences, drawing on input both from the natural sciences and the social and human sciences.

The contribution of science cannot only be based upon terms of research and knowledge, but must also be justified by its relevance and effectiveness in addressing the needs and aspirations of societies. In order to guarantee that the sciences are geared towards work for sustainable peace and development, all groups of society and all societies – with due consideration and respect for diversity – must be able to participate in democratic decision-making on scientific matters. The pluralist challenge cannot be circumvented in the rapid advance towards the construction of knowledge-based societies.

In South-East European region, rebuilding scientific networks and infrastructures and enhancing increasing cooperation among institutions is both urgent and important. This will necessitate the development of institutional capacities and human resources in the different disciplines and the

promotion of cooperation between the natural, social, and human sciences, with adequate attention given to the ethics of science.

Moreover, inter-active partnerships among scientific communities in West and East European countries need to be reinforced both at the institutional and individual levels. The disintegration of former Yugoslavia, for example, was both preceded and followed by massive emigration of individuals aged 25 and 40 with a high proportion of university graduates and scientists, pursuing scientific careers in West European institutions of higher learning and gathering experience of high relevance for their countries of origin.

With the aim of preserving and integrating scientific resources in countries afflicted by conflict, sudden economic and social transformations, or difficult transitions, university teaching and research at the national level must be strengthened, along with the development of capacities to access data. To further counter the “brain drain”, participation in international exchanges of scientific and technological information must be facilitated along with the participation of researchers – especially women and young researchers – in cooperative and international research.

- **World Heritage: heritage as a shared experience**

The Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations takes place in Ohrid; a distinguished site on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. Like all other heritage sites, Ohrid is a receptacle of memory, for cultural heritage – both in its tangible and intangible forms - embody the symbolic values of cultural identities and constitutes a fundamental reference for structuring society. As a shared experience, the foremost constituent value of the heritage is diversity. Insofar as it enables people to understand themselves, the cultural heritage is one of the keys to understanding others.

As in many parts of the world, the South East European experience has demonstrated that the heritage of others may become they symbolic target of aggression, ignorance and rejection. The protection of the heritage, and its presentation and transmission to future generations, are therefore ethical imperatives, inseparable from respect for the dignity of the human person and the “desire to live together” on the part of people and groups with different cultural identities. Today, the heritage must be made a cause for the protection of the diversity of cultures and of dialogue between them.

This is particularly important in situations where claims to heritage - turning into disputes over national symbols - remain a potential source of conflict, instability, and human suffering. Protecting the impressive cultural wealth of South-Eastern Europe will require sustained efforts, including international support. The 54 cultural and Natural sites inscribed on UNESCO’s World heritage List in the region call for the special attention of the Organization, especially as regards training in, and dissemination of, the relevant legal instruments. Special programmes for municipal administrators on the protection of cultural and natural heritage are particularly urgent. The development of a culture of conservation and of respect for the multi-ethnic heritage of the region will remain a priority for South-Eastern countries in the years to come.

During 2002, proclaimed United Nations Year for Cultural heritage, UNESCO chose the theme of reconciliation and development as the focus of its activities. In his message for the year, UNESCO’s Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura said, “The biggest challenge facing UNESCO, designated lead agency for the year by the United Nations, is to make the public authorities, the private sector and civil society as a whole realize that the cultural heritage is not only an instrument for peace and reconciliation but also a factor of development”.

The challenge everywhere – but especially for South East European countries - lies in associating cultural heritage with development policies and demonstrating how much this powerful symbol of a people’s identity can become a unifying factor for national reconciliation – not only as the mark of a common acknowledged past but also as the foundation of a shared future.

## **5. Towards the Future**

The linkages that unify the defence of cultural diversity, the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the respect for sustainable development must be maintained. This was one of the important lessons of the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, where cultural diversity was acknowledged as inseparable from the economical, social and ecological concerns, and qualified as a “collective force” at the service of sustainable development in the final Declaration of the Summit.

Cultural diversity may be defined as a principle for organizing sustainable cultural plurality, both within and across societies; hence the pluralist approach is oriented toward openness and participation. In the longer term, the identification, or creation, of crosscutting divisions and their representation in political decision-making processes in the state, as well as the creation of conditions that encourage cooperative action across ethnic cleavages on the social level, holds the greatest promise for moderating inter-group tensions and preventing conflict.

This approach fosters the “politics of interest”, not the “politics of identity”. It fundamentally depends on goodwill among citizens who recognize inter-group cooperation and dialogue as an opportunity or means to secure shared benefits.

As representatives of the nation and custodians of democracy, parliamentarians are the prime defenders of this crucial endeavour. Responsible for defining and implementing the political and legislative choices of the nation, they reflect the concerns of their electorates and adopt approaches conducive to appropriate solutions.

For dialogues about states in competition repeat themselves, and imposed settlements engender resentment that can endure in collective memories. The Ohrid Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations will compel recognition of the blend of historical conditions that determine some dimensions of the present – and mould the image of the future.