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**CONCEPT AND IMPLICATIONS
OF DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILISATIONS
FROM MACEDONIAN ASPECT**

BACKGROUND PAPER

**Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilisations
Ohrid, 29-30 August, 2003**

1. Context

Humanity is more than a notion. Humanity is a project. The entire history is a process where isolated, disoriented, unconnected, opposed, warring human groups gradually organise themselves into greater communities, which become aware that the elements joining them together by far surpass the factors that until then divided them. The foundation of the United Nations' Organisation is understandably the most significant date in this common world saga, inspired by the knowledge that, ***We are all one nation of people (Gens una summus)***. Their immense activity, from their foundation up to present days, has created conditions for the achievement of the progress of humankind more than all political undertakings before that.

In November, 1998, the United Nations' Organisation General Assembly declared the year 2001- the first year of the third millennium of our era - Year of Dialogue among Civilisations. Simultaneously, the attitude that "peace must be based on intellectual and ethic solidarity of all humanity" has been accepted as a universal axiom.

Bearing this generous mission in mind, on 5th September, 2000, as the first accord of the epochal UN Millennium Summit in New York, addressed by the UN Secretary General, Kofu Annan, the leaders from all continents on the planet gathered together at a Round Table in order to share their views, knowledge and wisdom, to make a draft of their common vision of the world of mutual respect, tolerance, peace, cooperation and prosperity. They reconfirmed that the general and essential prerequisite for this gigantic undertaking is the dialogue among civilisations.

In Vilnius, Lithuania, between 23rd and 26th April, 2001, the Director General of UN Educational, Scholarly and Cultural Organisation, Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, opened the Dialogue among Civilisations Conference, at which state leaders from all five continents gathered again to share words of understanding and respect.

Even the greatest buildings are constructed piece by piece, the same as the longest road is walked step by step. It became clear that once promoted and consensually accepted, the great idea of a general civilisation dialogue could efficiently be implemented by means of a sequence of well-organised and coordinated regional civilisation dialogues. At the High-Level Conference on Strengthening Cooperation in South-East Europe, held at UNESCO's seat on 4th and 5th April, 2002, the President of the FYR of Macedonia and UNESCO's Director General, Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, agreed on organising the first regional forum on dialogue among civilisations in Ohrid.

It is difficult to imagine another region in the world where the successful dialogue among civilisations could be of greater importance than the one that is being led here, in Macedonia, in the heart of this peninsular cradle of so many civilisations and cultures, in the Balkans!

2. Tradition of Dialogue: Macedonian Contribution

The UN efforts for promotion of dialogue and cooperation among civilisations find in Macedonia an extraordinarily fertile soil for their full accomplishment. No matter whether we deal with intra-regional, bilateral or multilateral cooperation, both citizens, domestic political institutions, and international community will encounter the existence of an exceptionally long and rich tradition of multicultural models, constituted and developed on the principles of mutual dialogue.

UNESCO's Universal Declaration of Cultural Differences, adopted at 31st Session of UNESCO's General Conference (Paris, 2nd November, 2001), as well as the UN's Global Agenda on Dialogue among Civilisations, adopted at the UN's General Assembly in November the same year, rightfully call upon the great significance of regional forums for affirmation of dialogue.

It is vital to evoke the fact that the Balkans as a whole, and Macedonia separately, represent an area of continuous and intensive dialogue of civilisations, which has already been going on for at least 2,500 years, perhaps longer than on any other place in the world! One could practically hardly find a better, more appropriate location for fulfilment of the UN's and UNESCO's prominent goals.

This region has always been a place with presence of elements of powerful and influential cultural standards and civilisation norms, which have determined the structural features of social life, and, with great efficiency, have prevented the outbreak of large-scale inter-cultural conflicts, violence and separatism. The area of Macedonia knows of periods of peace and cooperation between different cultures, religions, and civilisation models longer than any other multicultural area in the world.

It is customary to present both the Balkans as a whole and the area of Macedonia separately in the light of conflicts, separatism and irredentism programmes, eruptions of violence. These phenomena are part of the history of this region. Nevertheless, the Balkans is both a historical, cultural and civilisation whole. Its peoples, throughout their history, parallel to the periods of conflicts, have worked on building a life together. The performance of their role in the modern world, based on the obligations originating against the background of their huge contribution to the world culture, civilisation, philosophy, science and art in the past, certainly obliges them to maximally promote the principles of dialogue. The people from the Balkans want to systematically affirm the knowledge of civilisation unity and historical, political, and economic integration of the entire region, and as a strategic orientation to incorporate it into European and world global politics.

From a historical aspect it is hard to make an estimation of the civilisation values and cultural contribution of the Balkan peoples to the world as a totality. Before 1492, the world picture comprised only three continents: Europe, Asia, Africa. It was the Balkan region that linked, united them all. Therefore, for centuries, the geographical zone of Macedonia was known under the name *Catena Mundi*, i.e. the pole, the link, the chain of the worlds. The outstanding position of the Balkans has determined its special role in world history. Not only has it been a crossroads but also a connection, not only the main avenue but also the central square for the meetings of the civilisations from the three continents known by that time. Therefore, nowhere have there been so many turmoils, so many conflicts, and yet so many creative contacts of peoples, so different and so cooperative models of life practice.

If the human spirit had a certain shape, it would assume the topography of the peninsula. Joined to the continent, the peninsula becomes attached to its firm compactness, as, protruded into the sea, it simultaneously aspires towards the horizon of the open sea, full of challenge and uncertainty! The best synonym of the history of humanity is the peninsular form, which so clearly embodies the everlasting advancement towards the new and the unknown, and the unbreakable linkage to the never-ending continent of the entire tradition of human experience.

In the Balkans, and separately, on the territory of Macedonia, the world was connected also by the East-West axis from Persia to Iberia, as well as by the North-South axis from Egypt to the Baltic. Here, both Indo-European and Mongolic – Turan people. Macedonians, the Iliric people, Greeks, Tracians, Romans, Sassians, Celts, Normans, Germans, Hunes, Avarians, Slavs, Turks, lived next to each other, made wars, and yet they entered into alliances, traded and exchanged goods, mixed their blood and genes. Dialogue was their way of living and it was led in all languages spoken here. Cultures, ethnic communities, various ideologies, civilisation standpoints, religious practices, have existed one next to

another, they have merged with each other, have created an unbelievably intensive symbiosis. The Balkans and Macedonia can rightfully be called the first and the greatest laboratory for a dialogue among civilisations in the world history. The contribution of Macedonia, with its value, quality and the influences on this imposing tradition by far exceeds its geographic proportions. In the twenty five centuries of permanent experience, many misunderstandings, conflicts and wars have been noted. But they have been exceeded by the number of agreements, the scope of creative communication, the duration of the times of peace. Nowhere in the world have lived, together and without conflicts, for so long, representatives of big, monotheistic religions, Christians, Muslims, Jews. For about fifteen centuries already in Macedonia there has been no slave-owning regime, a form of subordination of people, which in some European colonies was abolished in 18th century, while in some other civilised countries it was abolished as late as in the second half of 19th century! Macedonia is the only civilisation point in Europe, where in their documents and proclamations the rebels against the Ottoman regime promoted the principle of unconditional respect for the religious and national freedoms of all of its inhabitants, a hundred years ago: on Ilinden, year 1903!

In Macedonia there was room both for capitalist and for socialist historical practice, just as there was vigour to abandon the latter when its ideological limits and inherent social weaknesses were ascertained. In Macedonia there had been no inter-ethnic, cultural or civilisation war for more than a thousand years. One crucial data: Macedonians and Albanians are perhaps the only two peoples that have shared the same territories but have *never* in the whole history fought against each other! In addition, Macedonia is the area from where the most creative surge of early Christianity spread out, the all-Slavic literacy; the only part of the European territories of the Ottoman Empire, where after the fall of the Ottoman state there was neither systematic expulsion of Muslims nor mass destruction of sacral edifices; it is a territory, where Jews, practically the first in Europe, found shelter and safety immediately following the expulsion from Spain, the year 1492, all the way until the Fascist pogrom dated 1943!

During the last decade, Macedonia marked the period of sovereignty and independence by the constitutional incorporation of maximalistically-formulated national minority rights, by far exceeding the rights they enjoyed in the neighbouring countries. And, eventually, Macedonia confirmed the contribution of its own experience to the great and indispensable art of dialogue among civilisations by the resolute choice to solve the conflict situation in 2001 through dialogue and agreement. The Framework Agreement signed here, in Ohrid, is a proof of the deep roots the Culture of Peace has in this country, a demonstration of the maturity of its citizens, and at the same time a signpost and an example both for the region (which, unfortunately, had to go through terrible conflicts with great casualties and material damage) and for all other multi-ethnic and multi-cultural areas in the world passing through the temptations of the period of transition.

These are the reasons why, in brief, the successful outcome of this regional Forum for Dialogue among Civilisations is of such and so big relevance for all countries in the world that accept and understand the notion of 'civilisation' as a universal, pluralist, and non-hierarchic phenomenon, pursuant to the definition stipulated in UNESCO's Action Plan (161 EX/INF 14), and a phenomenon which is in harmony with Macedonia's own historic tradition and civilisation commitments.

3. Pluralistic Experience versus Hegemonistic Trends

One of the key implications of the Macedonian concept of dialogue among civilisations, provided that historical facts are properly understood and the inherent potentials of Macedonian cultural model here and now are accordingly assessed, is the assertion of the pluralism principle. It is completely clear

that an implementation of an authentic cultural pluralism entails rejection of all forms of inter-cultural antagonism, exclusivity, and xenophobia in places where they are dominant manifestations of historical experience.

However, in the entire history of Macedonia, there have been developed forms of dialogue among local communities, cultural collectivities, and civilisation practices. The openness to the fact of diversity and the capability to accept the reality of “the other”, here have resulted in the will to live together, not at the cost of denying the right to cherishing one’s own cultural identity, but with self-understood sovereign specificity, and in Macedonia these have been self-understood prerequisites for collective progress.

The best evidence of this is the unanimous protests against the ideas of division of territories and people, recently presented by certain topmost scholarly and political authorities, and their vehement refusal by all citizens, regardless of their ethnic, cultural origin, or religious affiliation. An additional proof is found in the results of a research conducted on the whole territory of the Republic of Macedonia, which, even after the conflict from 2001, has shown that over 70 % of citizens have retained mutual trust, and as much as over 80 % have opted for the formulations: a common life in a common state.

These indicators are the central encouragement for a reasonable and suitably led political action. They lucidly verify that among the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia there is clear political awareness of and sensible commitment for building a democratic society where cultural and other differences will be an integral power and a constructive factor. In that respect, in Macedonia, the presence of cultural pluralism can relatively easy grow from a threat and obstacle into a precondition for a productive dialogue among all of its key actors. The participation of all collectivities in building a democratic society, as an element of the collective historical memory of all communities living in the country, can and should be a basis and incentive for the Republic of Macedonia for a defeat over hegemonistic tendencies, no matter where they come from or where they are instigated.

The fact that in the life of every society the dialogue between the different sides never ends, does not mean that the fundamental principles underlying that dialogue cannot be plainly formulated and that they should not be valid (relatively) forever, thereby denying institutional relativism. Macedonian historical experience has unequivocally established those solid principles. Therefore, they do not have to be inserted in Macedonian social tissue for the first time now. It is sufficient to reiterate the historically verified principles of agreement, especially in the delicate sphere of regulating the relations between the groups that are still being defined, in compliance with the quantitative criteria of majority and minority. Provided that this prerequisite is satisfied, and under the condition of non-discriminated application of legal regulations, the democratic concept of Macedonia will become a framework for a higher form of civic integration, where cultural differences will be asserted as autonomously-postulated features and it will be denied that they represent certain obstructions as well as sources of confrontation.

4. Strengthening of Pluralism by Intensifying the Dialogue between Macedonia and the Region

From the perspective of Macedonian historical experience, and in view of the dramatically important strategic location of Macedonia, the concept of dialogue among civilisations has multiple implications. On a practical level, it is directly and highly relevant to the stability of the region and thus to the rest of Europe; at the level of civilisation progress, the Macedonian concept is a sum of original

practices, inventive methodology, and summarised collective knowledge that affirm the priority of dialogue in all potentially conflict situations.

Released from heavy mortgages from inter and intra-ethnic wars, Macedonia is an extremely substantial element for stabilisation of the turbulent Balkans, and for promotion of peace, achieved through dialogue. Established as a multi-ethnic state, with its millennia-long experience of common life, Macedonia is a paradigmatic instance. Its positive potentials are enormous. Following this same line of comparatively exclusive historical experience, Macedonia can have a central influence on neighbourly relations, give direct contribution to the respect for human rights, elaborate and meliorate the principles for protection of national collectivity rights. In so doing, its potential influence on the successful application of democratic principles both in the country and in the whole region is harmonised with its central geographical position that balances the relations and neutralises the effects of historical conflicts in the four (prospectively, five) most powerful countries in the region.

In reality, the bottom-line of the delicate task for equilibration of interests in the multiethnic Balkans is the imperative for an efficient encounter with the challenge of pluralism and its institutional implementation. The identity of the area of Macedonia, not considering its immediate political identity in certain historical epochs, is mainly based on systematic development of contacts between the ethnic collectivities in the region, and development of cooperation, confidence, and, in particular, of unreserved mutual respect, as its dominant constants.

If one recalls that from a historical aspect, in America, the principles of tolerance were developed based on the fact about the balance of powers between different cultural and religious communities, where not a single one of them could efficiently impose its hegemonistic model for as long as one century, it is reasonable to conclude that in Macedonia the millennia-long experience of balancing utterly contradictory cultural influences has created mental capacities and cultural matrices of peace and dialogue of premier relevance to world experience.

At the level of the key area within the referential framework of communications and information, the Republic of Macedonia has a relatively long tradition of harmonisation with international standards of democratic informing. Its information system has practically never been usurped or monopolised on ethnic or cultural grounds. Not a single cultural, ethnic or other religious group has had such a dominant impact on public informing. The problem in essence reduces to reorganisation of potentials that were only ideologically controlled, with emphatic denial, even at that time, of whatsoever national or ethnic priority. From that aspect, a proper proportional distribution of logistic potential in this sphere is necessary as well as clear openness to international information influences.

As a matter of fact, cultural, educational and entertainment programmes cover all major ethnic, language and social collectivities, generating solid backgrounds for full assertion of efficient cultural pluralism. Consequently, the promotion of cooperation, dialogue, exchange of information and knowledge becomes a grounds for linking the public and private sector as well as an exemplary demonstration of standards that could serve as a model for the region.

A contribution to this is provided also by the intensive intellectual cooperation among distinguished scholars and media representatives regardless of their ethnic origin or language affiliation.

An explicit illustration for this can be the fact that a university where the teaching is done in three mandatory languages - Macedonian, Albanians, and English - already works in the Republic Macedonia. It is the South - East European University, which already achieves outstanding results, and which day by day acquires higher and higher local and international reputation. The fact that its establishment as well as the recent recognition of Tetovo University came after severe disputes, only adds up to the value of productive experience for the importance of dialogue, as a most adequate, proven form for solving problems. On the other hand, since their foundation, the already existing

universities, Skopje and Bitola Universities, have incorporated in their structure elements of systematic respect for the significance and contribution of all cultural collectivities in the region, first and foremost the Albanian and the Turkish ones. Humanistic education in the Republic of Macedonia, which at a university level has had a tradition of over eight decades, represents a substantial centre for dissemination of ideals of democracy, tolerance, mutual understanding, and esteem for the great axiologic milestones of humanity. Inter-university contacts in the region, not yet harmonised with the capacities of all countries in the region, have a long tradition, interrupted only in the last decade, after the well-known events brought about by the disintegration of SFR of Yugoslavia. After the current processes of stabilisation of the political situation in the Balkans, the promotion of pluralism receives a strong support by the Macedonian concept of dialogue among civilisations, accordingly presented and implemented first in the Republic of Macedonia itself, and afterwards in the productive dialogue with the neighbouring countries.

Certainly, the satisfying of this primary condition does not at all decrease the importance of building a scholarly network conceptualised in a contemporary manner, properly organised institutional capacities, infrastructure as well as correct distribution and usage of human potentials. The Republic of Macedonia, too, is strongly shaken by economic problems – one of the neuralgic spots of all Balkans – considerably limiting its capability for a fitting promotion of its high civilisation and humanistic capacities. Tens of thousands of highly-educated people with less than 30 years of age have left Macedonia in the last decade, probably forever, thereby reducing its intellectual young generation virtually by half. The intensification of an efficient and contemporary international scholarly dialogue, technological information, and participation in international research projects could be efficient methods of putting a halt to “the outflow of brains”. At the same time, it could be the most effective option for integrating the modern innovation technologies and capacities into the rich pluralistic experience and cultural heritage of Macedonia. Its final goal is to stimulate development policy as a factor in building a national unity, as a foundation stone of the modern democracy state.

5. Philosophy of Dialogue and Respect, Macedonian Vision

The zone of Macedonia historically represents one of the sources of world culture. Therefore the notions of culture and civilisation experiences are intrinsic qualities of Macedonia’s own identity. To the citizens of Macedonia, cultural diversity and intensive processes of interaction of cultures, typical of this region, make self-understandable the imperative of respect for cultural versatility, the cherishing of one’s own cultural features, and the creation of efficient preconditions for unhindered cultural pluralism, i.e. to them, these are part of everyday mentality. To the citizens of Macedonia, the unbreakable connection of economic, social, and regional political interests is apparently located in the respect for cultural pluralism principles, as a kind of collective power and a crucial requirement for regional stability.

In Macedonia, the philosophy of dialogue and the axiomatically postulated categorical imperative for respecting the culture of “the other” is expressed through the socially incorporated awareness of the relevance of the parallel respect for the politics of interests and cultural identity politics, too. The disproportion of the dynamics through which these two spheres are manifested, wherein changing of interests is by far more accelerated, has led them to the main conclusion: cultural identity must never be sacrificed! On the contrary, only based on the full respect for that identity, as a fundamental principle of common life in multicultural communities, can there be an equal and productive basis for promotion of politics of interests, deduced by the premises of knowledge of the value of dialogue and mutual

cooperation, where no one is compelled to sacrifice or privileged to enforce the standards of one's own cultural identity!

The semantically extremely precise as well as poetic toponym of their common peninsular home is deeply impressed in the collective memory of all cultural and ethnic communities, which have more than a thousand-year common life experience in Macedonia. If it is true that *name is destiny (Nomen est nomen)*, then the Balkan toponym in a sovereign and incomparable manner epitomises the quintessence of Macedonian philosophy of dialogue and respect in the same way as it delineates the track of its civilisation vision.

Bal-Kan – one can read it, in etymological terms it really has a meaning, and the inhabitants of this Peninsula would prefer to believe that is what it means - a phrase blending the substances of honey and blood: 'bal' means 'honey', 'kan' means 'blood'. Both the value of honey and the preciousness of blood are universal. No monopoly can be established either over honey or over blood. They do not tolerate exclusivity. They are par excellence common for all, inclusive. Just as the best from the world of nature (honey, as a symbol of concentrated healing quality, nutritional values, sweetness - the things everyone is entitled to) cannot be appropriated only by some people, in the same way the vital substance, the liquid of life of all people – the blood – is equally essential to the greatest, the most powerful ones and to the most minor ones! Neither honey nor blood allow gradation or discrimination. Hence, for the sake of its inhabitants, the Balkans has retained in its name, as a big warning, the message that there can be a life together only provided that the common rights of everybody to nature are regarded, and the essential sameness of blood – the substance that will make people equal more than whatsoever political system.

This mighty metaphor contains also the Macedonian vision of dialogue among civilisations, perhaps its main message to be conveyed to the world: everyone will play a role in the creation of and access to common values, and no one will have the right either to exercise violence or to destroy human lives.

The world is to become a place where everybody will gather honey and no one will shed blood!