

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism

The role of culture in an inclusive Europe

Conference "Inclusive Europe? Horizon 2020"

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Prime Minister Gyurcsány,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends !

I would like to thank Minister András Bozóki for his kind invitation to this conference. I am very glad to be here with you today in the beautiful premises of the Hungarian House of Parliament constructed by Imre Steindl.

After the meetings in Germany and France, it is only fitting that this itinerant investigation of Europe's cultural foundations reaches one of the new Member States of the Union. If you string together Berlin, Paris and Budapest, they tell us the story of Europe's process of integration: from the original core, to one of the newest members of the family. It's equally fitting, therefore, to try and take a fresh look, in particular at some aspects of our cultural cooperation.

But let's first remember from where we come. We have come a long way towards building Europe in the past 50 years:

- We have integrated important policy domains for the common good;
- We have ensured that Europe is firmly rooted in essential values: freedom, democracy, equality, and solidarity;
- Above all, the Union has given us the longest period of peace and prosperity in the history of its members – and it reaches out to share this achievement with future members, and the world at large.

These are achievements we should not forget. They have changed the lives of our citizens. They present a model to the world. The European Union is a reference for innovative governance, based on equality, fair competition and solidarity among its members, large and small; a reference for peaceful relations with other countries, governed by mutual respect, cooperation as much as solidarity.

Let's not make the mistake to take all this for granted, and to allow this unprecedented success to be overshadowed by problems we face today. Understand me well, I do not counsel complacency. These are not easy times for the European Union and for its Member states.

We must tackle our problems urgently in order not to undermine what we achieved. New challenges arise, which need new bold replies. The European Union is not a static situation, it is a process, work in constant progress, requiring political courage, tenacity, but also flexibility, the recognition of the need to change, and the common will to succeed.

One of the areas requiring change is the relationship between the Union and its citizens. This is a complex issue, and let no one think that it is only a matter of informing citizens better and more fully about what is at stake. Of course, this

must also be done, and I applaud the considerable efforts which my colleagues, led by Commission President Barroso, deploy to that effect.

But not only the European Commission is called upon, all stakeholders are, including the other Institutions and the Member states. But in addition, we must develop our concept of communication beyond information, and extend it to include better inclusion, active participation of our citizens in the European project. We are not starting from scratch.

Many of the areas for which I am responsible -education, training, culture, youth, citizenship, sport- offer possibilities for participation through mobility and exchange: of ideas, practices, and citizens. More could and should be done in these areas in order to give more citizens a chance to experience Europe in their personal lives. Participation, personal experience – these are powerful ingredients in communicating the sense of Europe, especially to a population, too young (and fortunate!) to remember what initially drove the European project, which was to avoid for ever the horrors of the past.

These considerations are at the heart of the Commission proposals for the new generation of programmes for education and training, for culture, for youth, for citizenship. I am happy to see their positive reception by Ministers and Parliament. I urge a quick solution to the debate on the EU budget for 2007-2013. It is the key to the timely implementation of these programmes.

But beyond that, it will be the gust of fresh air that is urgently needed to lift the present fog, created by the budget deadlock, over Europe's future.

Culture has a crucial role to play in involving our citizens more closely in the European project. For you, participants in this conference, this is so obvious that I don't have to rehearse the arguments in any detail.

This has been done on many occasions, including at the highest level in Berlin and in Paris by the German Chancellor, the French President, and the Commission President. But let me remind you of some key words:

- culture as a harbour sheltering many identities,
- culture as a source of creative strength, freedom, empowerment and democracy,
- culture as a bridge between citizens,
- culture as an instrument stimulating mutual trust and respect,
- culture as an educational tool,
- culture as a motor for economic growth,
- culture as a model of intercultural dialogue in a troubled world.

Indeed, culture has all these roles to play, and should do so much more – a need which was dramatically illustrated by the recent unrest in some European cities. This conviction has led me to propose to my Commission colleagues that 2008 be proclaimed the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The Commission recently approved this proposal, and I am confident that the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament will do so as well. The European Year will be a unique awareness-raising tool, mobilising public authorities, civil society organisations and individual citizens, representing the whole spectrum of ethnic, religious and other groups in our society.

It is that same conviction about the increasing role of culture, which has inspired the Commission and the Member States to play a leading role in the negotiations on the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity. Its recent adoption is an unprecedented achievement. For the first time, the world community has created a pillar of cultural governance. And for the first time, the EU has spoken with one, determined, voice on culture in an international context.

And by doing so, it has obtained the extrapolation of a principle enshrined in Art. 151 of the EC Treaty, saying that all policies must take into account the specificities of culture.

These examples illustrate that culture is moving higher on the ladder of priorities. Conceptually, and operationally. We must also reflect this in the operation of the Culture 2007 programme. I am happy to say that Ministers of Culture reached a partial political agreement on this text last Monday.

One thing we know: the budget for Culture 2007 will not be as high as you and I would like it to be. Let me appreciate at this place the enormous work and commitment of cultural organisations such as the European Cultural Foundation or the European Forum for Arts and Heritage who have lobbied hard for a higher budget. Everyone knows their “70 cents campaign”. And indeed, the European Parliament has demanded now for the new financial perspective a rise in the budget. But it will not be as high as we would like it to be. We all know why. That may be a matter for regret, but it should also be a stimulus for us all to think about additional ways and means to develop the full potential of culture.

First steps have already been taken. Ministers of Culture have developed a rolling agenda, setting up a work programme of cooperation on issues, like the economics of culture, the mobility of artists and of museum collections, in addition to the activities under the Culture programme.

The series of conferences, of which Budapest is the latest edition, offer us an opportunity to reflect on what has been done and what more could be done. And we can do so with the participation and encouragement of the highest level of government.

But reflection, essential as it is, must be followed by action. That is very much my hope, both for these conferences and for the rolling agenda of our Ministers. In that spirit, I would like to applaud the suggestions made in Paris by my colleague and friend, Minister Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres. He has indicated a number of areas for further co-operation among Member States in addition to the European Culture programme. The themes he has mentioned, like cultural heritage, tourism, music works, literature and translation are interesting and promising areas of further cooperation.

The Commission is most willing to carry these suggestions further, and with that purpose I will instruct my Directorate general to convene a meeting of Member states' representatives. That meeting should also address ideas that came up in Berlin, or will come up in Budapest and following meetings.

Needless to say that we should avoid overlaps, that we must ensure transparency and the widest possible participation. Ideally, suggestions in this new context should find their way into the rolling agenda of Ministers. Ideally again, all Member states should participate. At least they should all know. But I do not

exclude at all a co-operation in specific areas which are of interest for groups of Member states.

What matters for me is that we open a new perspective for open and voluntary Cultural co-operation at European level, in the full respect of the principle of subsidiarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As a European of Slovak descent, I feel very close to the motivations, the hopes, and the concerns of our Hungarian hosts and I commend them for their “Inclusive Europe” initiative.

The two countries have a lot in common, including a long border and an even longer stretch of our recent past. They also share the deep-seated feeling that we have always been part of a continent-wide community of history, values, and ambition. In a word, we have always known where our cultural allegiances lay.

After regaining freedom in 1989, this feeling has given our peoples and our political leaders an immediate sense of direction.

As we discuss what culture can do for Europe’s future, let us not forget what it has already done for us in the recent past.

Thank you.