



SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL

Lisbon, 23 June 2007

Colloquy "Promoting intercultural dialogue: issues and perspectives of the Council of Europe"

Dear President,
Dear High Representative of the UN Secretary General for the Alliance of Civilisations,
Distinguished participants,
Dear Friends

Europe is multicultural. This is not some abstract ideological notion, but a reality in cities and towns across our continent. People of different cultures, ethnic origins and religious confessions are living side by side, as schoolmates, neighbours, colleagues. The objective of intercultural dialogue is to encourage and help them to learn about each other, to accept each other and to respect each other. To live with each other, not against each other and to benefit from each other.

We are convinced that the cultural diversity of our continent is an asset, a source of mutual enrichment.

In order to manage our diversity in a spirit of dialogue and respect, and to accomplish socially cohesive societies, Europe must agree on a number of ground rules.

Human rights offer these rules. And they are inseparable from intercultural dialogue.

The equal enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms by everyone – together with effective democracy and good governance at all levels – is not only an essential prerequisite for stability, economic and social progress; it is also the only way to enable mutual trust and respect to grow. Only on this basis can we develop a democratic culture that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of all.

The promotion of intercultural dialogue is therefore among the main political priorities of the Council of Europe. Over the years, we have developed European legal instruments that protect minorities and eliminate discriminations.

I think for example about the European Convention of Human Rights, the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Revised Social Charter. Both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities have frequently dealt with the challenges posed by cultural diversity. Over several decades, the Council of Europe has also developed practical tools and training schemes to enable us to learn from other cultures, to understand our neighbours and to live and work together for the benefit of all .

Based on these experiences and legal *acquis*, we are now developing a coherent policy which addresses the issue of integration of migrants; the challenges of religious diversity in the midst of our societies; the delicate balance between respecting other cultures and safeguarding the basic values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These values underpin our societies and are non-negotiable. They help us to live within a global economic and political context and to develop and fully live our own identity.

In short, to be all equal and to be all different.

Intercultural dialogue in all its forms is important because it brings peoples and cultures closer together and reduces the risks of misunderstanding, tension and conflict.

Intercultural dialogue is also part of our three-pronged approach in the fight against terrorism, together with close legal co-operation, and the insistence on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Our policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue also relates to its religious dimension.

It is true that *"the exploitation of religion by ideologues intent on swaying people to their causes has led to the misguided perception that religion itself is a root cause of intercultural conflict"*, as the authors of the recent Report on the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative have put it.

However, religious beliefs and practices, like any other human convictions, are an expression of our cultural identity. It is why we regard religious diversity as a dimension of cultural diversity. The Council of Europe has been involved in dialogue with representatives of different faiths for some time. The process started a few years ago and has since gained momentum. Our Committee of Ministers has now started preparations for a first "Annual Meeting on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue" which, on an experimental basis, will take place in 2008 to promote dialogue with representatives of religious communities and civil society organisations with a religious background. The institutional context of this dialogue may be evolving, but the underlying objectives have remained the same: to work with religious communities in their role as a driving force for co-operation and dialogue.

I am very happy to see so many representatives of other international institutions attending this colloquy. The Council of Europe is firmly committed to inter-institutional cooperation in this area. With many of the international partners represented here today we have regular working relations. We are ready to take new initiatives to exchange experience and information, to avoid double-work and to make the most out of the available financial resources. One instrument for doing that is to extend the existing "Faro Open Platform", which both UNESCO and the Council of Europe wish to promote as an effective coordination instrument.

I am particularly honoured by the presence and participation of my good friend, Mr Jorge Sampaio, the newly appointed High Representative of the UN Secretary General for the Alliance of Civilisations. The "Alliance of Civilisations", in our view, is an important initiative likely to mobilise all forces interested in bringing about a culture of dialogue and cooperation. It will give added visibility to the endeavours of many international and regional institutions working actively for the promotion of international understanding and dialogue. The four priority areas identified by the "Alliance" – education, youth, migration, media – are part of the portfolio of activities of the Council of Europe.

I therefore see a great potential for a good, practical cooperation between the Alliance and the Council of Europe.

There is a second reason, a more practical reason why this colloquy is an important event for the Council of Europe. The colloquy is part of the preparations of the "White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue", which we intend to publish towards the end of the year.

Today and tomorrow, we will conclude the consultation phase of the White Paper, and enter the phase of actual drafting. The consultations, organised between January and May this year in various formats, have been far-reaching and comprehensive. We have consulted all major stakeholders of intercultural dialogue – governments, parliamentarians, local and regional authorities, religious communities, the media and many civil society organisations including minority and migrants' organisations.

I use this occasion to thank all those who responded to our invitation to share with us their views and suggestions. I am convinced that in tomorrow's working session we will hear many interesting points of view, and many examples of good practice which are worth being made known to Europe at large. That, too, is the purpose of the White Paper.

May I most heartily thank the Aga Khan Development Network and "Ismaili Centre" for hosting our colloquy.

Thank you.