

**STATEMENT**  
**by H. E. President Georgi Parvanov**  
**at the Regional Forum on**  
**DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS**  
Ohrid, Aug 29-30, 2003

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I must confess that to me **the choice of Ohrid as the venue for this forum** dedicated to dialogue among civilizations **is more than symbolic**. In addition to embodying a *Europe of diversity*, the inimitable atmosphere of this city makes one tangibly aware of both *the historical and the present-day meeting of a number of various cultures and traditions*.

Perhaps this is the place where one can most easily come to realise that the so- called "*clash of civilizations*" **is neither inevitable, not a desirable destiny for mankind in the 21st century**. On the contrary, today's globalizing and mutually interdependent world **demand** *an intensive dialogue among civilizations as the only possible strategy for peace and for development*. And as experience sometimes shows, such a dialogue is not merely a beautiful dream, it is a dream that **can** come true. This dialogue is achievable because **culture can serve not only as grounds to disagree but also as and the most solid ground for building understanding and consensus**. At the end of the day, unless we succeed, through the dialogue of civilizations, to establish a civilization of dialogue, we would be jeopardizing peace and stability, and hence everything else.

In this context, **any fatalism that might attempt to squeeze culture differences into rigid and irreconcilable boxes, to divide Europe along the boundaries of empires long gone, according to the various alphabets or religions is untenable and politically dangerous**.

By the way, I can assure you that such fatalism is disproved also by *the experience of the Republic of Bulgaria, being as it is a country where old cultures and civilizations have come to cross and build layer upon layer, and where some of those same boundaries happen to lie*. And I do hope that our experience in dialogue and coexistence gained through the centuries and successfully upheld into the present day may contribute to the richness of the discussions at this forum as well. Throughout its centuries-long history, **Bulgaria has been the linkage between the East and the West, between Christianity and Islam**. This history has educated the Bulgarian people in *tolerance for and acceptance of the diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds*. And it

is this tolerance that lies at the foundation of *the unique Bulgarian ethnic model*, which established itself soundly over these years of democratic development. **Bulgaria has remained peaceful and stable despite the fires raving around it.** This stability has been the result of the common efforts of all: *Bulgarians, Turks, Roma, Jews, and Armenians.*

Indeed, *the Balkans, this cradle of antique civilizations and cultures, have more than once been ravished by destruction and bloodshed.* Such events might be ascribed to many factors and reasons, yet they are hardly due to any clash of civilizations. That is why today it is up to us, and to our friends and partners to make this region into *a place of peace and stability, where the peoples live in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, in close co-operation and friendship with their neighbours.* For the first time in decades, all states in our region have been governed by *democratically elected governments.* For the first time they have declared *common values and have been maintaining an active dialogue among themselves at all levels.* Today, all the countries of South-East Europe are pursuing **common strategic goals: membership in the European Union and NATO,** and these prospects has been reaffirmed at the NATO Summit in Prague and at the Thessalonica Summit of the European Union. **Bulgaria believes in these prospects and is working with determination and consistency for their realization.**

**Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The venue and the topic of our forum inspire a *special thrust* in my address. I was brought to it by a thought formulated by the honourable **Mr. Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,** whose participation imparts special significance to our forum, namely, that **through their common cultural heritage, the countries in our region can overcome the present sources of prejudice and intolerance and lay the foundations for peaceful and stable development.**

Just over a month and a half ago, we, the Presidents of *Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia,* visited our three countries one after the other and here, at Ohrid, we signed a **Joint Declaration for furthering cooperation in the construction of the Pan-European Transport Corridor 8 and other infrastructure projects along its route.** All three of us agreed that *the construction of this corridor will have a strong positive impact not only on our three countries but also on the economic and infrastructure development of the entire South-East*

*Europe, and for the accelerated integration of the countries from our region into the EU and NATO.*

During this tri-lateral meeting, crossing from one country into another, we were pleased to find that *there is a lot in common in our food, songs, dances, costumes, customs and traditions.* And this means that **there is a lot in common among our peoples, in our history, in our culture.** What is more, *this commonality can be found in all countries of South-East Europe.*

This commonality has not remained unspotted by our scholars and experts in the area of **cultural and historical heritage.** Several years ago, at the initiative of the Bulgarian National Committee of ICOMOS, an international team was set up, which included representatives of all countries from South-East Europe. This team went on to develop a common methodology, and on the basis of that each country systematized its cultural and historical heritage into ages, plotting it onto its national map. Then, a smaller team aggregated these maps and made a *common General Map of the cultural and historical heritage of South-East Europe.*

The result has been amazing! The preserved cultural and historical heritage formed clearly visible **culture corridors**, which have been tracked across our lands millennia and centuries back, and today *they have not only survived as the living memory of civilizations in our region but stand as some of the strongest ties among our peoples.*

Because **these cultural and historical corridors disregard the boundaries.** They start from the Adriatic, run across several countries and end at the coasts of the Black Sea. Others set off from the Mediterranean Sea and reach all the way into the Carpathian Mountains. Still others trail along the course of the Danube. These corridors or, as the scholars called them, *“cultural and historical routes”*, date from various ages, they were set up by various civilizations in which our forefathers also had their share, *yet they are here, in our lands, and they are our most treasured heritage through which we can and must present ourselves before the world, as one of the cradles of the world civilization.* /This paper has been made available in English to the participants in this conference/.

So, along with the construction of the lacking infrastructure corridors among our countries, **let us make the most rational and effective use of what has already been created, namely, the cultural and historical corridors.** These have been built and have existing for centuries now – back in the times of the Thracians, of ancient Hellas, the Roman Empire and the Byzantine, the Ottoman Empire, the Balkan Revival.

That was why, one and a half months ago, at the closing press-conference of our tri-lateral meeting in Pogradec, I suggested that next year we hold a **meeting of the heads of state of all countries in South-East Europe, to be devoted to the exceptionally rich cultural and historical heritage of our region.** Bulgaria is prepared to host that meeting, which could yield the answers of *three major questions*:

*First, how to communicate to our peoples, to our European partners, and to all our friends worldwide this vast heritage of history and culture abounding across our lands.* Because, regrettably, it is mostly our scholars and experts who know of this priceless treasure, while our citizens are only vaguely aware of it, and next to nothing has transpired to the people beyond our region. During our most recent meeting, EU Enlargement Commissioner Günter Ferheugen and I discussed this issue and he expressed *the willingness of the European Commission to provide financial support and technical assistance for implementing a wide PR campaign, which would present the great contribution of South-East Europe in the development of the European and the world civilization.*

The second question to be addressed by our summit meeting is *how this unique cultural and historical heritage can be used most rationally and effectively*:

- *to ensure mutual opening up and cultural bonding of the countries from our region;*
- *to enhance a wide opening up and cultural bonding of our region with the rest of Europe;*
- *to facilitate the social and economic development of the countries from our region;*

*The mutual opening up and cultural bonding of the countries from our region is the easiest to achieve,* because it depends entirely on the political will of the countries and the peoples in our region and because this process, although spontaneously, has already started. **All we need to do is spearhead it by goal-setting and promotion.**

*Opening up widely and the cultural bonding of our region with the rest of Europe is more difficult to achieve,* as it requires overcoming certain misconceptions about our region that have set in over the years, picturing it as a place of wars and ethnic conflicts, which do not quite match the concepts of heritage and achievement of human civilization. Nevertheless, with a well thought-out common approach, we can and must demonstrate that **South-East Europe has an important place in the cultural history of Europe and the world.** In this respect, special attention must be given to *information technology and the Internet*, and to furthering the *cooperation among scientific, research and educational*

*institutions in the countries in our region and the other European countries.*

*The best way to use our cultural and historical heritage for the purposes of the social and economic development of our region is to involve it, in a rational and effective way, in the tourist industry.* In some of the countries in our region, this has already been achieved to a considerable degree. Still, the dynamic development of cultural tourism in recent years, in combination with a development of the transport infrastructure, increase the demand for special topic routes, which expand beyond the boundaries of only one country. And as evident from the research project of our scholars and experts, our region is well equipped to develop cultural tourism along *the road of the Thracians, the road of the Hellenes, the road of the Romans.* Or *along the road of paganism, the road of Christianity, the road of Islam.* And why not *along the road of wine, the road of cheese, the road of bread.*

And that is not all! If we were to trace carefully the cultural and historical routes, we will discover that *very often they run through exceptional natural landmarks, curative spa springs and natural preserves abounding in unique flora and fauna.* This is yet another vast niche for yet another type of tourism, the so-called **eco-tourism** which, just like cultural tourism, *implies observing strict requirements to protect and sustain the tourist product.*

Thus, we have arrived at **the third major question** to be considered at our forthcoming meeting – *the full uncovering and preservation of our cultural and historical heritage.* Our experience so far has shown that **in addition to some serious financial means, the key to this lies in regional cooperation.** *First*, because *it pools together the entire scientific, research and expertise potential of our region* which, regrettably, has been increasingly melting away lately. *Secondly*, because *the heritage of one age is not limited to any one single country but encompasses almost the entire region.* And *thirdly*, because *treasure-hunting and dealing in cultural and historical artefacts has already become subject to the operations of international organized crime, and counteracting that also requires an international approach.*

As regards the considerable amount of **funds** necessary to uncover and protect our cultural and historical heritage, *a significant part of those funds could be generated in the tourist industry, which uses this heritage as a major product in its operations.* However, this source of funds will become operational only after the tourist product has been included in the active business cycle. Prior to this, some **start-up investment** will be needed, which could come either from *grants from the EU or certain donor countries* or *in the form of loans from international financial institutions,* or from *the own capital of the*

*private sector*, which could be involved under a *concession arrangement*. The same arrangement will have to be provided for *the initial financing of the necessary engineering infrastructure connecting and servicing the cultural and historical landmarks*. So, we have once again arrived at the transport corridors and the other infrastructure projects along their routes.

Evidently, a future summit on the cultural and historical heritage in South-East Europe has to address a **large range of issues – political, cultural and historical, economic, financial, social, environmental**. Therefore, I would suggest that participants in that meeting should include, along with the *heads of state of the countries from our region*, also *high ranking representatives of the EU and the international financial institutions, the scientific and research community and practicing experts*, as well as *the business community*. Thus the meeting will become a **working international forum**, the final output of which could be a concrete *action plan for the full uncovering, preservation and effective use of the cultural and historical heritage of South-East Europe as part of the heritage of the world civilization*.

If we manage to achieve that, we will demonstrate that *our past works more in bringing us together than in dividing us*, that *in our history and in our culture, alongside our diversities, there are also many things we have in common*. And it is **these common things that we must use as a stepping stone for our future**. That means that **just as our region has had a common past, it can have a common future**. It is time we took this future up ourselves and our first joint step in this direction needs to be a *Common Strategy for the European future of South-East Europe*. Bulgaria has already proposed several times that **we all develop this common strategy, our strategy. It is time to roll up our sleeves and do it!**

Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, Ohrid is sending an important signal to the entire international community by **actively supporting the important goal set by the UN and UNESCO to weld a bond among culture, peace and development**. I am confident that the discussions at this forum will dwell on the regional dimension of the dilemma of a dialogue vs. a clash of civilizations, and come up with relevant solutions and ideals on how to overcome differences and strengthen peace and cooperation on the Balkans.

This will make our contribution in the shaping of the world of the 21st century as *a world of mutual interdependence and mutual understanding, a world of openness, trust and cooperation*.

*Thank you for your attention.*