



It is an honor to address you this afternoon. Let me begin by thanking our esteemed Director General for having presented the reports to us, and to express my gratitude to all who took a hand in their preparation.

I would like particularly to commend documents 179 EX/4 and 179/EX/5. They clearly summarize the activities that took place over the course of the 2006-2007 biennale, in line with our short- and medium-term strategies.

We support the Organization's structural reforms, as well as an increase in cross-sector cooperation.

And the Republic of Serbia underlines the importance of persisting in the struggle to eradicate illiteracy and promote gender equality, in the context of providing for equal access to education. UNESCO ought to remain a global leader in this field, serving as a laboratory of ideas.

We also support the new strategy for strengthening scientific capacities at the national and regional level. I underline the importance of the International Basic Sciences Programme framework that has enabled us to successfully cooperate with both the UNESCO Secretariat and its Regional Office in Venice. For example, in 2003, the Faculty of Science of the University of Niš became the coordinator of the Southeast European Network in Theoretical and

Mathematical Physics. Since that time, it has significantly expanded its institutional and curricula network—and has even transcended its regional boundaries.

I underline my country's close cooperation with UNESCO in the field of sustainable water programs. I recall that the International Research and Training Center on Urban Drainage was established at the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the University of Belgrade back in 1987, and that our Director General honored the Center with a stop-over during his 2004 official visit to Serbia.

I am honored to confirm that UNESCO will sponsor an international conference entitled "Climate Change on the Eve of the Second Decade of the Twenty-First Century", in May 2009. It will be hosted by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, in honor of the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Milutin Milankovic—the visionary founder of a scientific approach to the study of climate change.

I am also honored to highlight the leading role of the Republic of Serbia in promoting regional cooperation. We took the lead in following up on the conclusions of the High-Level Conference on Strengthening Cooperation in Southeast Europe, held at UNESCO headquarters in April 2002. Deepening regional cooperation contributes to the democratic consolidation of peace, stability and reconciliation—gateways to the attainment of the European future of the Western Balkans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Republic of Serbia continues to uphold the enduring role of UNESCO: to construct an impregnable defense of peace in the minds of men and women through the bridging of differences and the promotion of our common heritage and human rights.

The greatest challenge to human rights in Serbia lies in our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija, under United Nations administration since June 1999. Given UNESCO's mandate, I shall limit myself to a brief discussion of the plight of our cultural and religious sites in the province over the past eight years.

More than 150 churches or monasteries, at last count, including dozens that were built as long ago as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, have been set ablaze by Kosovo Albanian extremists in the past eight years, including 35 during the March 2004 pogrom against Serbs in Kosovo.

Hundreds of other holy sites remain at risk, something that has been recognized by UNESCO and its Centre for World Heritage. All four of our World Heritage designated sites that are located in our province of Kosovo have been placed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger.

Serbia greatly appreciates UNESCO's sensitivity in this area of our cooperation. Allow me therefore to give credit to the important work of the World Heritage Committee. We support its reorganization and consider it vital for its capacities to be strengthened.

I would also like to recognize the personal engagement of Director General Matsura, and to particularly thank Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic, together with the Council of Europe, for their help to restore and conserve the Serbian heritage in Kosovo. I can assure you that Serbia's Ministry of Culture, together with our National Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments and the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, will expand their cooperation with the international community—in order to more effectively implement the protection, preservation and restoration of Serbian heritage sites in our province of Kosovo.

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In conclusion, I want to underline the precise nature of the fight to preserve Serbian heritage in Kosovo—and to underscore its universality—in the context of the danger posed by the unilateral, illegal and illegitimate declaration of independence by the Kosovo Albanians on February 17<sup>th</sup>.

The purposeful attempt to vandalize, loot, burn, desecrate, and destroy what others have built

long ago, in the conviction that such deeds will contribute to the invention of an historical narrative of one's own, must be condemned in the strongest possible terms, and identified clearly for what they are: zealous, fevered, revolting acts of cultural cleansing.

Such is reality in Kosovo today—a dark, ugly reality that stains the fabric of democratic achievements in the Western Balkans. No peoples can afford to build a common future on the ashes of a vanished bequest. To protect and enhance the cultural achievements of humankind is a great task before us all. For our heritage constitutes a foundation of identity, a basis of development, a tool of reconciliation, and an instrument of peace.

Thank you very much for your attention.