Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very sorry I cannot be with you in person to participate in this conference on such an important and exciting issue. I have always been a strong supporter of the arts and culture. As Gao Xingjian put it, “Culture is not a luxury but a necessity”.

I also believe firmly in the significant role culture can and should play in the EU’s external relations. The links between the worlds of diplomacy and culture are not new – in 1960 France’s highest ranking diplomat, Alexis Leger, was also the winner of the Nobel prize for literature under his nom de plume St John Perse. Indeed, through the ages there are countless examples of the way the arts and culture were used to foster links between countries and build bridges between peoples.

But we have perhaps lost sight of the interactions between these two worlds, and of the valuable cross-fertilisations which take place. Which is why, as you have already heard, the European Commission published last year its “European agenda for culture in a globalizing world”.

I don’t need to remind this audience of the importance of culture as a vehicle for transmitting identity. Cultural activities are a vital and powerful way of expressing identity and of explaining what it is we Europeans stand for.
The diversity of cultural expression across the European Union is of course staggering, encapsulating as it does the enormous diversity of cultures and artistic practices embraced by our continent.

Yet, just as we talk about being united in our diversity, there is a common cultural basis for the EU, grounded in our common values, which is expressed with each and every cultural manifestation Europe’s artists perform.

It is precisely because of this diversity of expression that cultural activities are such a powerful tool for conveying the European approach. And that is why we are so determined to give cultural activities a higher profile in the EU’s external relations.

We are putting culture on the agenda of our discussions with governments around the world, from India, to Russia to Latin America and of course with those closest to home in our immediate neighbourhood. We are promoting regional meetings of ministers of culture and organising events like “EU weeks” to showcase our artistic contributions.

And we are encouraging cross-cultural activities, like those of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the dialogue between cultures, about which you will hear more later. The potential for culture to bridge divides and bring people closer together has led us to designate 2008 as the European Year for Intercultural Dialogue. We are looking to increase cultural exchanges on every level; improve understanding of each other; and boost tolerance and respect of differences.

A third dimension is ensuring that all policy and funding decisions across the entire breadth of our activities take into account cultural sensitivities. That means infrastructure
projects have to consider the cultural impact of routes and working arrangements as much as other considerations like cost and efficiency.

It is very early days for our work in these areas, but we are fully committed to putting culture at the heart of the EU’s external relations. For that reason I would like to warmly thank the organisers of this conference for giving us a forum in which to exchange ideas and talk about further collaboration to bolster our approach. I hope new partnerships will develop and new proposals will emerge to guide us as we move forward.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a successful and enjoyable two days.