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Editor-in-Chief: Borut Meško, Editors: Polona Štekar and Maja Cerkovnik

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## INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AT FOREFRONT OF SLOVENIAN EU PRESIDENCY

Slovenia is to hold the EU's rotating six-month presidency in 2008 as the first among the countries that joined the Union in 2004. The list of its priorities includes institutional reforms, EU enlargement, energy issues and the European neighbourhood policy, as well as intercultural dialogue. In the words of Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, Slovenia has actively promoted global intercultural dialogue since becoming a member of the EU and NATO in 2004. Its decision to put it at the forefront of its EU presidency is tied in with the fact that 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Slovenia wants to make a substantive contribution on this issue and therefore plans to carry out projects that will contribute to dialogue among cultures. The main goal is to alleviate tensions between majority populations and Muslim communities in EU member states as well as between the EU and Muslim countries. At the same time Slovenia wants to highlight the value of intercultural dialogue for the Western Balkans, a region that Slovenia knows well because of its proximity and a shared past. As Minister Rupel recently pointed out, this is the only region of autochthonous Islam in Europe that, in spite of recent conflicts, has a long tradition of peaceful coexistence.

## CONFERENCE ON INTERETHNIC AND INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN KOSOVO PROMOTES UNDERSTANDING

Slovenia hosted on 8 February a conference that examined relations between ethnic communities in Kosovo. The conference entitled "Intercultural and Inter-Religious Dialogue: Building Bridges of Understanding and Cooperation in Kosovo", held at Jable Castle, the seat of the Centre for European Perspective (CEP), was aimed at promoting intercultural cooperation in the region. The participants discussed the possibilities for building relevant and concrete intercultural dialogue among the ethnic communities in Kosovo in view of its future status.

The event brought together leaders of ethnic and religious communities, government officials and international experts, as well as members of the interim Kosovo cabinet. Also taking part in the conference were experts and government officials from Slovenia and abroad with extensive experience in the field of interethnic, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. Their discussions were particularly pertinent because they took place less than a week after special UN envoy for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari laid out a draft plan for the status of the province.

The Centre for European Perspective (CEP), which organized the conference, is a non-profit and independent institution established by the Slovenian government last year to provide assistance to Southeast European countries and other countries bordering the EU

## ROUND TABLE STRESSES IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY FOR DEMOCRACY

A round table examining intercultural dialogue and the spread of democracy was also held in Ljubljana in February. The participants concluded that people must learn to live with diversity instead of trying to do away with differences. Different cultures must be accepted with a common identity found among them. Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel said that the EU should now focus on the Mediterranean, which had for centuries been at the heart of intercultural dialogue that now needed to be revived.

Key participants in the event, which was held on the margins of the conference on intercultural dialogue in Kosovo, were also the US political scientist and author of numerous books on intercultural dialogue, Benjamin Barber, former envoy of the UN secretary general for the Year of Dialogue among Civilisations Giandomenico Picco and lecturer at the Ljubljana Faculty of Theology Drago Ocvirk.

Barber said that the expansion of democracy required a bottom-up approach and could not be forced top-down. He also stressed the importance of bringing up young people with democratic awareness, an aspect also highlighted by Picco. Meanwhile, Ocvirk focused on the Catholic view of democracy and intercultural dialogue.



Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel taking part in conference on intercultural dialogue and the spread of democracy. To the left of Rupel is Benjamin Barber, while Giandomenico Picco is to the right. (photo: STA)

## ISLAMIC DIGNITARIES STRESS IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE AND TOLERANCE

There is no peace without peace among religions, and there is no peace among religions without dialogue was the conclusion of the panel entitled "Role of Islam in Contemporary Societies", another side event of the conference on interethnic and inter-religious relations in Kosovo. The panel brought together Islamic dignitaries from the UK, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia, among them Mustafa Cerić, the reisu-l-ulema in Bosnia; Imam Abduljalil Sajid, chairman of the British Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony; and Slovenian Mufti Nedžad Grabus.

The world is entering a century of dialogue, and without peace among religions, there will be no peace at all, said Cerić, referring to Swiss theologian and author Hans Kueng. According to Imam Sajid, differences have to be

with their efforts to join the Union. The event was the first in a series planned by the CEP and the Slovenian government related to intercultural dialogue.



Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel speaks at a press conference held as part of the conference on relations between ethnic communities in Kosovo. He is flanked by (left to right) Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, US political scientist Benjamin Barber, Imam Abduljalil Sajid and the former Personal Representative of the Secretary General for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations Giandomenico Picco. (photo: STA)

### FM RUPEL: PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION NEEDED IN KOSOVO

Foreign Affairs Minister Dimitrij Rupel opened the conference on interethnic and inter-religious relations in Kosovo. He pointed out that the conference was taking place at a time when the process of finding a solution for Kosovo had entered its final and also the most difficult phase. He added that interethnic dialogue in Kosovo was in its infancy, which was why both ethnic communities, but especially the largest one, would have the responsibility of engaging in a process of reconciliation. What is more, inter-religious dialogue in Kosovo is even younger and ideas on how religious dignitaries can play a positive role in it are still largely unexplored, he said.

In Rupel's view, traditional religions in Kosovo "all have deeply ingrained messages of peace and respect, if not love for the next". These are powerful tools that need to be put in action for the common good, he said. Since the timing of the conference coincided with Culture Day in Slovenia, Rupel drew parallels to message in the poem 'The Toast' by Slovenia's greatest poet France Prešeren. At the centre of the poem, which became the national anthem when Slovenia gained independence in 1991, is a longing for a time when neighbouring nations are no longer foes, but good friends.

### TASK FORCE MEETS TO AID SLOVENIA IN PRESIDENCY CHALLENGE

Slovenia will be aided in its efforts in the field of intercultural dialogue by the taskforce on multicultural dialogue, a joint initiative by the Centre for European Perspective and the Foreign Ministry. The ad hoc group, which held its maiden meeting at Jable Castle near Ljubljana on 7 February, is made up of 11 experts on intercultural dialogue from Slovenia and abroad. Its mission is to find ways to alleviate tensions in political, social, cultural and religious fields among the Muslim communities in Europe, as well as in the EU's relations with Muslim countries. The members of the task force promised to continue their discourse via videoconferencing, while their next meeting is scheduled to take place in New York in autumn.

The taskforce is comprised of such authorities as Imam Abduljalil Sajid, chairman of the British Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony; Mustafa Cerić, the reisu-l-ulema in Bosnia; Slovenian Mufti Nadžad Grabus; Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder and CEO of the American Society for Muslim Advancement; US professor

respected, which is why cultural diversity must be fostered and monoculturality avoided, as it can only lead to ghettoisation, he said. He added that European Muslims should find partners for cooperation and think about the future. Slovenian Mufti Nedžad Grabus focused on the position of the Muslim community in Slovenia.



Round table "Role of Islam in Contemporary Societies": Slovenian Mufti Nedžad Grabus, Imam Abduljalil Sajid, chair of the panel Borut Grgič and reisu-l-ulema in Bosnia Mustafa Cerić. (photo: STA)

### BARBER CALLS FOR ACTION ON INTERETHNIC, INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

US political scientist Benjamin Barber believes more than words are needed if the EU is to tackle the burning issues of war and cultural conflict. A discussion on the true causes of conflict and new activities in this area is needed, but actions must follow eventually, Barber told STA.

Barber, also a member of the newly established taskforce on multicultural dialogue, said he welcomed the fact that as an American, he was given the opportunity to take part in efforts to foster intercultural dialogue and tackle conflicts that divide the world.

"Slovenia is an ideal EU member state to do something in this respect," he said, especially because it is a small democracy and small democracies are often the ones that teach big democracies what needs to be done. What is more, Slovenia has been on the margin of conflicts in the Balkans over the last 15 years, but it has managed to find its way without getting involved in the violence. Now it is a role model and a partner to the Balkan countries.



US political scientists Benjamin Barber and Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel engaged in a conversation. (photo: STA)

and expert on multi-cultural dialogue Benjamin Barber; and former Personal Representative of the Secretary General for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations Giandomenico Picco.

Also in the task force are Hannan Ashrawi, chair of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy; Francesco Francioni, international law expert and the director of the International Centre for Peace Studies at the University of Sienna; lecturer on religion and sociology at the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts Marko Kerševan; Slovenian theologian Drago Ocvirk; and Marija Žerič, head of the Croatian cultural society in Bosnia-Herzegovina 'Napredak'.

"I admit that differences exist between us, but they need not divide us," Slovenian Foreign Affairs Minister Dimitrij Rupel said in his address at the first session of the taskforce. "We should rather understand them as a possibility for achieving greater mutual respect and understanding."