

*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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**Address to the European Parliament**

*Strasbourg,  
October, 22, 2008*

Mr PÖTTERING, President of the European Parliament,  
Mr Harald RØMER, Secretary General of the European Parliament,  
Honorable Members of the European Parliament,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Senhor Presidente do Parlamento Europeu  
Senhor Secretário-Geral  
Senhores Parlamentares  
Excelências  
Minhas Senhoras e Senhores

Não quis deixar de fazer esta saudação inicial na minha língua materna, o português, mas todos compreenderão por certo que, na qualidade em que aqui hoje me encontro, recorra a outro código linguístico...

Let me express at the very outset my heartfelt thanks to Mr.Pöttering for his kind words of welcome. Let me also add that it is an honor and a great pleasure to address this prominent audience both on behalf of His Excellency the Secretary General of the United Nations and in my capacity as his High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Secretary General was invited to address this parliamentary session but was unable to be here today with us. He has asked me to deliver the following message, and I quote:

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**MESSAGE TO EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SESSION  
ON THE EUROPEAN YEAR OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE (2008)  
Strasbourg, 21 – 22 October 2008**

*“It is a great a pleasure to send greetings to all the distinguished participants in this important session of the European Parliament on intercultural dialogue.*

*Throughout its history, Europe has seen terrible outbreaks of armed conflict often rooted in prejudice and hatred. Yet the continent has also been fertile soil for some of the world’s most remarkable innovations, artistic creations and scientific progress. Europe’s tremendous diversity and its strategic geographic position, at the centre of old and new migration routes, have made it a significant venue for cross-cultural interaction and interfaith dialogue. In particular, its close relationship with its neighbors across the Mediterranean makes Europe an important bridge between civilizations.*

*Like many other regions of the world, Europe faces multiple challenges in promoting intercultural dialogue. Migration, economic uncertainty and political tensions are putting strains on relations between different cultural, ethnic and religious groups.*

*But it is precisely in your region, where constructive contacts over the centuries have allowed humanity to take major leaps forward, that opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation exist.*

*This special session today holds great promise. I urge you to make the most of this opportunity, and to pursue joint economic projects, educational exchanges, and other initiatives that will improve people’s lives and create a bulwark against intolerance, religious fundamentalism and extremism.*

*The United Nations will do its part to support and complement your efforts, both in and beyond Europe. The Alliance of Civilizations is one of our main vehicles for this work. It aims to address the growing divisions between societies by reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect between peoples. It also seeks to mobilize joint action for this purpose. Among the Alliance's major initiatives are a Youth Solidarity Fund to promote dialogue, and a Global Expert Finder to provide a source of commentators who can shed light on potentially divisive issues.*

*"If I were to do it all over again, I would begin with culture." These famous words, most often attributed to Jean Monnet, who worked so tirelessly for European unity, remain strikingly relevant today.*

*Cross-cultural tolerance, dialogue, respect and understanding must be pillars of the better world we are trying to build. It is very encouraging to know of your strong commitment to this quest.*

*For the sake of countless people living between the extremes and yearning for dignity and peace, let us work together so that intercultural dialogue can bear fruit. In that spirit, please accept my best wishes for the success of your discussions".*

Unquote.

Excellencies,

As a former MP I know that Parliament is and always will be the home of democracy. Its members have the sometimes ungrateful task of guaranteeing a sustainable view of the future for the people they represent. As far as Europe is concerned, we all know how slow has been the evolution of the parliamentary institution, and how great the challenges and difficulties encountered to enforce a specific European model of democracy. I can only praise the work already carried out and its contribution to build a more participative, pluralist Europe that is closer to citizens, closer to all citizens. These are the results of your labour and therefore I wish to address a warm greeting to all the members of this assembly, the legitimate representatives of a community of nations committed to the pursuit of an original and unique project, in which the last century placed so many hopes and which in this one faces so much expectation.

Members of Parliament,

I come today to speak to you of the Alliance of Civilizations, an issue that although it may seem remote and distant from our day to day life is in fact deeply embedded there. An academic dispute between scholars who predicted the end of history and the clash of civilizations, but that turned into a major hot social topic, a challenge to democracy and a core issue of international policy because of globalization, increased migrations and 9/11. An issue, finally, that the United Nations managed to put high on the global agenda.

What am I talking about?

I refer to the extreme ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of our societies and of the increasing difficulties we experience in living together. I speak of the worsening divides of all types, the consequent erosion of social cohesion and of the feeling of a shared collective identity and the broken trust in the international system. I speak, too, of a widespread malaise at world, regional and even local but generalised scale, that has been expressed in increased tensions intra and inter-communities, mutual distrust, in polarized perceptions and world views, in intractable identity-based conflicts, and in extremism. Furthermore, I speak of religion being employed as a tool by all and sundry, and used and abused for various purposes and effects. I speak also of the disorientation of political powers, confronted with the deficiencies of a purely security-based and/or repressive approach, and the absence of suitable policies and instruments for proper governance of cultural diversity.

All this serves to underline what to me is irrefutable evidence: cultural diversity has become a major political issue challenging modern democracies, pluralism, citizenship and social cohesion as well as peace and stability among nations.

For me this is crystal clear and even if serious but circumstantial crises such as the current financial and economic turmoil take up all attentions, we cannot allow present emergencies to deflect us from handling the in-depth problems of today and guard against the catastrophes of tomorrow.

Members of Parliament,  
Excellencies,

To put it harshly, to us, to the European Union, stripped down to its bare essentials, it means: how to integrate minorities, all minorities, but the Muslims of Europe in particular? How to develop our relationship with the Mediterranean? Where to draw the lines of the European project? How to enhance European foreign policy to project what we consider universal values to the world?

In my view, this is all about fundamental questions concerning values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. This is about democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for cultural diversity; about justice, social cohesion and inclusive societies; about States, secularization and secularism or *laïcité*; about the public sphere, private acts and religious revival. This is all about European identity and values. That's it.

As time is obviously very short, I will not be able to discuss all these points, so I will focus on the issue of the Muslim minorities in Europe.

Why there is growing anxiety about the integration of Muslims in Europe ? Because it is a demographic issue ? Yes, of course! Because there are nearly 15 million Muslims in Western Europe and 7.5 million Muslims in Eastern and Central Europe and because this population has tripled in the last 30 years and if these trends continue, Muslims will account for about 10% of the population of the EU by 2020.

Because of the integration issue? No doubt about that! In my view, the presence of Muslims in Europe is not a question of Islam and the West, but an acute problem of integration, not to be underestimated. There are persistent difficulties and pitfalls ahead, which will not be overcome unless comprehensive and consistent political action is taken in different settings. Education for all and youth policies based on equal opportunities, jobs, economic development, social cohesion, democratic societies, pluralism and inclusive citizenship are the main political aims to be achieved through political means.

But, to my mind, there is another thing, there is an identity issue. Indeed, the arrival of immigrants in any society has an impact on the host country's sense of self. But the point here is that, as someone has put it, "the dam separating Christian Europe from Muslim East has sprung a leak, altering Europe's culture".

Why, for instance, did past discussions on the preamble of the former European Constitution end in such vocal acrimony? Why does Turkey's accession to the European Union trigger such passionate and combative debates? All these questions are inter-related and they all point to the so-called European values and identity.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In order to reinforce it, European identity should encompass individual allegiances and adopt cultural legacies. Europe as a place where we can live together as equals requires more and more respect for human rights, strengthened pluralism and better governance of cultural diversities.



Therefore, in order to cope with the integration of Muslims in our European societies we need new policies at all levels. We need European action, but also national governmental initiatives as well as local measures. We need democratic governance of cultural diversity. In order to develop appropriate cultural policies we need to build cultural statistics and indicators to enlighten decision-makers and the decision making process and to monitor and assess the implementation of those policies. We need integrated perspectives and policies on migration. We need to develop democratic citizenship and participation. We need to learn about and to teach intercultural competences to our citizens. We need to create urban strategies and policies for intercultural dialogue. We need to engage civil society at large, youth, religious leaders and the media. But we need also to expand and develop the intercultural dialogue agenda in international relations and give it priority.

As a retired politician, let me remind you that, at the end of the day, all this is about democracy and about participation in political life. Trust in democratic institutions, and political and civic engagement are key to building inclusive societies and strengthening citizenship.

Mr. President,

Honorable Members of the European Parliament,

Excellencies,

How can we live together in our globalizing world, where clashes anywhere are clashes everywhere and where cultural and religious fault-lines divide our societies? This is the global challenge the Alliance of Civilizations is facing and which it has to address in concrete terms.

Turning this global challenge into “glocal” deliverables is therefore AoC’s main task. By “glocal” I mean that deliverables have to be extensively underpinned by a global approach, but have to be implemented at a local level.

This means that the Alliance relies greatly on the European Union to implement an agenda of good governance of cultural diversity in the European region, meaning by that not only the members of the European Union, but also its neighboring countries, particularly the Mediterranean ones.

This is why I am so happy that an Action Plan on cooperation between the European Union and the Alliance of Civilizations has been agreed and will provide a solid base for the pursuit of concrete objectives and the implementation of practical projects.

In this regard, let me stress how important and significant it will be if the European Year of Inter-cultural Dialogue could be expanded into a long term, sustainable framework for promoting good governance of intercultural diversity. I am sure that it would have a terrific impact on boosting National Strategies for intercultural Dialogue comprising measure and programmes on education, media, migration and youth that I have asked countries to design and implement. This is a suggestion that I put forward last April and to which I would like to draw your attention, asking honourable Members of Parliament kindly to back it.

Another area where in which the Alliance is eager to collaborate is the Union for the Mediterranean in order to help improve and manage intercultural diversity and inter-cultural dialogue, including inter-faith issues, within and among European and Muslim societies and communities.

Excellencies,

To put it bluntly: the current international difficulties and the increasing anxiety we all feel in living together in mutual respect have encouraged the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course leading to a clash of civilizations.

We face increased polarizations that come up against a backdrop of growing tensions over a series of political issues and of growing cultural stereotypes. It goes without saying that political conflicts can only be solved through political negotiations. The long-term resolution of tensions between Muslim and Western societies, for example, cannot be achieved as long as some of the egregious sources of hostility are not successfully addressed.

But it is equally true that peace agreements rarely hold if they are not strongly backed by the communities involved. Many peace deals in the past have floundered because deep-seated suspicion and hostility remained, dividing people along cultural and religious lines.

Now the point is that all findings are unanimous and show a great divide in the way Westerns and Muslims view each other, with Westerners seen by Muslims as patronizing and domineering, and Muslims seen by Westerners as fanatical and intolerant. Moreover, socio-economic marginalization and discrimination generate disaffection and intolerance, and aggravate the chasm between Muslim and Western publics.

This so-called divide, opposing two fictional monolithic blocks, Islam and the West, fuels further stereotypes and polarization, and gives rise to extremism. But let me stress that the vast majority of peoples reject extremism in any society and support respect for religious and cultural diversity. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are concerned by the challenges of security and the threat of social polarization. Millions of Muslim families worry about losing their young to religious and political extremism.

In order to tackle this problem, new strategies to manage and promote inter-faith dialogue as part of cultural diversity, based on universal human rights, should be developed. In other words, creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace requires efforts of a different kind, aimed at generating a mind shift among divided communities. This is my first concluding point.

My second point regards the need to give political priority to the development of democratic governance of cultural diversity.

In the European Union this implies creating a collective identity between its citizens - regardless of their origins and their ethnicities, languages, philosophical beliefs, political and religious affiliations - to share values, attitudes and projects, and make room for a common future to build on together. This is why cultural diversity should go hand in hand with protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, equal opportunities for all, economic solidarity and social cohesion.

Excellencies,

These issues will not be sorted out in the short term and long term efforts are needed. Indeed, the temptation to give up is likely to be with us all the time, but we must never resign ourselves because after all small changes in circumstances can produce big shifts in behavior. And this is exactly what we need to generate the will to live together in mutual respect and appreciation of our ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious differences.

The urgency of the task cannot be underestimated. But I am sure that with your work and your commitment, we will manage to live together in integrated communities.

Many thanks