

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY!

**Speech by Foreign Minister dr Miro Cerar at the Creative Forum Ljubljana 2019
(14 November 2019)**

Ministers, excellences,

Dear guests, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends,

Slovenia is proud to be **among the leading EU Member States that insist on the centrality of culture in foreign relations**. It comes then as no surprise that cultural diplomacy forms one of the central pillars of our international affairs. This was high on our agenda during our first EU Council Presidency in 2008, and we are determined to keep it there again in 2021, when we take up the Council's steering wheel again.

Much will have changed, though, between 2008 and 2021. In 2008, when the EU celebrated the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, a large part of Europe had just removed their internal borders. European ideals of a unified cultural space seemed to finally turn into reality. **Today, in many parts of Europe, on the contrary, borders are yet again being drawn, both physical and ideological ones**. Walls are being rebuilt both within our cultures and towards others.

In this context, the cultural and creative sector is taking on a more strategic role than ever. Undoubtedly, it is an important stimulant of economic growth and job creation. But, even more importantly, it is **the key generator of social revitalization and stability**. It is a source of tolerance, inclusiveness, inspiration, adaptability and resilience – all those elements that are intrinsically linked to the quality of life and significant benefits for the most vulnerable social groups.

Consider the motto of this's year *Biennale of Industrial Design*, opening tonight in Ljubljana: **Common Knowledge**. Is culture not the most tangible, the most experienced common knowledge we can imagine? From the books we have all read through the musical tunes we all whistle to the movies we like to quote or even enact – culture *is* our common knowledge, our motivator and our integrator.

The Creative Forum Ljubljana was born out of the same desire for integration.

The Western Balkans and Southern Mediterranean are two regions particularly dear to our foreign policy. We wanted to propose a platform that would help strengthen the connections between their people in a forward-looking way. Creativity seemed the most obvious choice.

We are delighted that our vision coincided with that of the Secretariat of the **Union for the Mediterranean** and that, in April last year, we launched this process together. The first Creative Forum confirmed that creativity and was the key to intensifying regional development. It called for dialogue between creative workers and policy makers, as well as for a more structured support mechanism at the regional level.

We are delighted to welcome all 20 countries here today – creative individuals, entrepreneurs and policy makers, accompanied by all relevant international organisations that are best placed to guide us through what works and what doesn't.

I see particular significance in the fact that we were able to bring together decision-makers from the fields of economy, foreign affairs and culture. This is what we call **Creative Capital United**: not only cities, regions and countries working hand in hand, but also sectors finding common ground for breakthroughs in industry, education, foreign affairs, tourism, information technology, and more.

Those of you who had the chance to visit this year's Venice Biennale surely remember its title, the one that unites ancient Chinese wisdom with a quote from Robert Kennedy: *“Like it or not we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also more open to the creative energy of men than any other time in history.”*

Indeed, our common Mediterranean region continues to face many challenges, from open conflicts to migration. **Syria** is facing yet another intensification of violence. In **Libya**, the political process has been stopped once again by this year's new military offensive. And, on the two-state solution, deepening frustrations are seriously eroding support in both **Israel and Palestine** for a political and peaceful path toward resolving the conflict.

The **Western Balkans** has a special geostrategic importance in this context. It is at the crossroads of many promises and threats in the Euro-Mediterranean space. It is of utmost importance to recognise its special role, support its development and assure its resilience. Slovenia is a strong supporter of the EU expansion process and of both the European and Euro-Mediterranean perspective of the Western Balkan countries.

At the last European Council, unfortunately, we were not able to reach an agreement regarding the opening of negotiations with **Northern Macedonia and Albania**.

After the formation of the new European Commission, setting clear goals regarding the region will be our priority. **Promises should be kept if we are to be serious about the merit-based process.** Methodology can serve as a tool on this road – but should not defer the final goal. I see an important challenge and role for the Union for the Mediterranean in this process, too: namely to investigate how to further deepen the integration between the Western Balkans and the South.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen,

May all these **nautical flags around us** serve as a reminder of **creativity's unique potential to guide us through the turbulent waters of the Euro-Mediterranean region**. May they remind us of the necessity of making culture not an accessory, but the pillar of the regional development strategy.

In conclusion, I would like to thank to my colleagues that organized this Forum, to the Union for the Mediterranean for its very precious partnership, to all the Forum's partners for their great cooperation and creative inspiration, and especially **to all of you who came to Ljubljana to unite forces and jointly challenge the sea of change.**