

*Europe's cultural & political voice -
The role of Cultural Capitals of Europe*

I am very glad to be here with you today because the University Network of European Capitals of Culture is a magnificent idea and a tool for helping cultures to be properly understood and be therefore of immense benefit to the young people.

Our times are very different. They are dominated by the pursuit of money, cynicism, corruption, mistrust, fanaticism, racism, fear, insecurity, terrorism and war.

Under these circumstances, especially with the recent world financial crisis, it looks unfavorable to speak about the importance and role of culture, when citizens are living in anguish for their survival. But, on the contrary I personally strongly believe that this is the time when we must react and believe in the power of culture. This is why the your work is very valuable.

We all know that when the growth in material goods is not balanced by a parallel development of ideas and values, then the way of life produced is condemned to wither and degenerate. This unfortunately has already started.

The European Union is now established as an economic unit in the world today. Its views are sought on diverse matters from world

trade, climate change and economics to fundamental political issues.

The European Union is not a single country or a single state. It is a loose confederation. Often finding it difficult to agree on most basic issues and whose central political and economic institutions are unfortunately remote from the European public. There is increasing talk of a crisis of confidence but no agreement as to how this is to be overcome.

The “no votes” in the Netherlands, France (2005) and Ireland (2008) were a shock to the political elite of the EU. These expressions of rejection of the EU project are serious. They indicate disillusionment among the citizens.

Proposals coming from the Commission aim at harmonizing rules, laws, regulations and state aid schemes, to meet the requirements of a single internal market operating according to free market rules.

The financial crisis begun in the USA has proved that the uncontrolled and unregulated operations of the free markets have brought about an enormous financial crisis.

The financial ties between the United States and Europe have made the problem a global one.

Reflecting severe concern about the health of the global financial system, American, European and other major central banks drastically escalated their response by making available to banks many hundred billion dollars.

The coordinated actions reflected official concern that financial markets appeared to be facing their greatest problems since the great depression of the 1930's. To face the crisis the then President of the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt with his New Deal created public works and jobs. Now the United States government and the Federal Reserve are infusing a huge amount of cash into the banks. But it is the banks which have created the problem in the first place. Public opinion was not satisfied.

European leaders meeting in Paris, under the suggestion of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown, have agreed a plan to tackle the banking crisis, saying no big institution will be allowed to fail.

They pledged to guarantee loans between banks until the end of 2009, and said they would put money into them by buying preference shares. This plan is a guarantee that people will not lose their money.

Let us hope from this financial turmoil a greater solidarity will evolve which will bring closer the member states of Europe for the betterment of the European people now and in the future.

The European political elite have to decide, at their peril, not to disregard the wishes of the citizen.

Today, Europe is only one player amongst several. To the west, the United States remains the dominant single economic and political power. Further east, there are the rising Asian giants, China and India, whose economies seem to represent the future. Nearer home Europe faces a further challenge from the recovering power of Russia, a state long regarded with unease and ambiguity and doubt as to whether it is part of Europe or not. To the south Europe is faced with the challenge of how to adapt to the rise of political Islam and whether to treat this phenomenon as an existential threat or one with which an accommodation can or should be sought. Further south, still the new African states for all their massive problems represent a huge potential whilst to the west, in South American new giants such as Brazil appear to be rising.

The rise of non European powers is a fact. Nothing Europe can do can stop it. Nor should it try. On the contrary the rise of the rest of humanity, of cultures and civilizations some of which have made their own colossal contributions to human culture and human history is something we should unequivocally welcome. It is not the rise of other people and other cultures that should concern us. Rather we should find the ways of how Europe will be able to have a constructive dialogue and understanding with these rising forces for

the benefit of humanity. To do that, Europe should proceed towards its unification.

Every conceivable aspect of European life is being addressed and talked about as a means of solving the European crisis. One can hear discussions about European economic and monetary union, about European science programs, about structural reforms of European institutions, about agriculture, about trade, about the harmonization of European laws, about whether a single European foreign policy should be adopted or is even desirable. We should talk and concern ourselves about education, the arts and creativity and about the one thing that has had most influence on the modern world and which has made Europe into what Europe is: its culture. It is time to understand that culture is at the centre of our political, social and economic life.

On November 28, 1983 at Zappeion Megaron in Athens, the then Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri gathered all Community Culture Ministers together in order to submit to them the following question: "How is it possible for a Community which is deprived of its cultural dimension to grow?" and continued: "our role as Ministers of Culture is clear. Our responsibility is a must. Culture is the soul of Society. Therefore, our foremost duty is to look at the foundations and nature of this Community. This does not mean that we should impose our ideas. On the contrary, we must recognize the diversity and the differences amongst the people of Europe. The

determining factor of a European identity lies precisely in respecting these diversities with the aim of creating a dialogue between the cultures of Europe. It is time for our voice to be heard as loud as that of the technocrats. Culture, art and creativity are not less important than technology, commerce and the economy”.

So Melina proposed to designate each year a European city as a Cultural Capital of Europe. She wanted to create an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe and to give a cultural dimension to the community and a more attractive image.

The European community, a commercial and economic community up to that point, had not given special attention to its cultural dimension and Cultural Ministers met informally. Yet the gathering of the Ministers of Culture in Athens in November, proved to be a momentous occasion.

When Greece proposed to the Ministers of Culture the event of the Cultural Capital, it did so in the belief that a real contribution would be made through culture to Europe which would enhance and reinvigorate both the individual citizen and the people of Europe.

Also, it was certain that through the efforts to achieve a higher quality of life the event of Cultural Capitals would expand to cities of European countries outside the Community according to the principles of Democracy, pluralism and the rule of law.

The proposal was unanimously accepted and the institution of European Cultural Capital was created, with Athens being chosen as the first Cultural Capital of Europe for the year 1985. I had the honor of becoming director and coordinator of this cultural event.

The concept of the event of Cultural Capitals of Europe should show the character of each city which is nominated, with its history, tradition and contemporary creativity.

Athens wanted the event of Cultural Capitals of Europe to be NOT a festival but a meeting place for discussion, communication, and exchange of ideas, thus creating a dialogue between the cultures of Europe where artists, intellectuals and scientists would bring their work and efforts together towards the promotion of European thought.

Also the Cultural Capitals to be an event in which the citizens of Europe could be more than mere spectators by allowing them to participate, to understand, to feel, to define and shape new ideas and relationships in the process for a politically unified Europe.

From what has been said up to now, it is clear that the event is not only what a cultural city offers and does on its own, but the contribution of all the Cultural Capitals and Cultural Months together as a whole.

In Madrid in 1992, the Network of Cultural Cities of Europe was formed, and a big step taken towards a more concrete, practical and close collaboration between all Cultural Capitals. A vacuum had been filled and a link with the cities had been established. Since then the Network also undertakes as one of its many tasks the promotion of the idea of European Cultural Capital City in order to persuade the peoples of Europe the importance, the essence and the value of culture.

The membership of the Network is limited to representatives and organizers of former and future Cultural Capitals and Cultural Months.

These people work together with their governments, their municipalities, institutions, organizations, artists, intellectuals and citizens. They analyze situations, they select the right people to organize new projects and they coordinate the events of the Cultural Capitals of Europe.

The main aims and objectives of the Network are as follows:

- To assist the European cities of Culture
- To organize European and world-wide co-productions
- To enhance cultural co-operation and promotion on a European-wide basis

- To share information, skills and contacts concerning the managements and financing of European cultural programs
- To maintain an archive of information about innovative cultural practice and creations. An archive center has already been organized and functions under the initiative of the Municipality of Athens.

The Network of Cultural Capitals and Cultural Months of Europe serving both the Cultural Capitals and the European Union has had a significant cultural impact and contributed to a deeper understanding of the diversity of European cultures.

Cultural Capital of Europe which started as an idea, a vision, has developed into the most important European Cultural event and became an Institution.

Unfortunately, during the last decades the arts are flattening. There exists a certain amount of standardization and imitations of a model of American culture. There are many cultural events that are only for entertainment and commercial gains. The media encourages cheap journalism and commercial reality TV shows and focus on gossip and big headlines instead of genuine information about the society we live in.

When we talk about the “productivity of culture” do we include much of this low quality culture which is now becoming the mainstream?

Vision and creativeness are missing.

The arts and culture are defined by the creativeness of the artists. The true artist is an independent and free person. He has a prophetic instinct for what is coming and is ahead of his time in all things artistic and cultural. He agonizes over new aesthetics; works for new visions; and helps to create a new awareness. The artist resists institutionalized and artificial barriers. He abhors all that curtails his soaring spirit. His special uniqueness gives him the ability to bring about change in the way you and I look and think. If his creativeness withstands the passing of time then the artist and his achievements have crossed the borders of his domain and given everyone the gift of his talents and enriched the cultural heritage belonging to us all.

When the level of culture, education and intellectual life rises, citizens will understand their daily problems more easily. They will evaluate their problems better and will face life with greater understanding and show greater tolerance for the thinking and acting of other people.

Fine arts, poetry, drama, music, science are expressions of culture. However, the meaning of culture is much wider and deeper. Civilizations are formed by what man has said and done since thousands of years ago and which, up to now, have been accepted and absorbed by societies and peoples and have been added to in their habits, thoughts, memories, actions and creativeness.

Culture absorbs from the past, moulds the present and shapes the future.

Culture exists in all our doings, in all our activities. It is knowledge, education, behavior, responsibility, understanding and respect for the diversity and the opinion of others. It is creation, quality and a way of life.

The institution of Cultural Capital of Europe has achieved a lot, but has not managed to convince the centers of power in their negotiations and their decision making processes to take into consideration as much as they should the human being, the environment and culture.

Throughout the ages mankind has consistently sought progress.

In the long history of human civilization there has been a whole series of renaissances each one making its contribution to moral and

intellectual regeneration and to the betterment of the quality of life.

I believe that it is this moment which will give to the institution of Cultural Capital of Europe and the networks, the impetus to unite their forces and work together for the promotion of this noble idea.

In 1985, Jack Delors, the then President of the European Commission, introduced the idea of the "collective ambition". The purpose being to promote the best of European Culture, through a solidarity of values. It was a guided target aimed at a united "European Act". It was easily ratified in 1987 by the 12 member States and was the most important European agreement after the Treaty of Rome.

The period 1985 to 2000 was a period of unification. Since that period, the unification of Europe, has gone wrong. Sadly the strategy of renewal through treaties which guided the regeneration of European Unification through 1985 - 2000 appears to have lost its momentum.

The inspired ability of Europe to overcome the dilemma of deepening or the enlargement of the European Community by successfully combining both for 20 years seems to have come to a halt.

There is political, intellectual and nationalistic ambiguity towards the process of European unification. But the unification of Europe is a must.

Maybe the last enlargement was too fast, and caused some new member states a wish to protect their nationalistic sentiments and those of their self interest. Thus bringing problems into the EU and delays in its unification.

But the main reason is the lack of belief and confidence of the people of Europe and especially the young. They feel that they have been let down by the European Union which shown a failure to create new horizons, visions, hopes and expectations.

The big question is where does Europe go from here and for what purpose?

Today, the developed countries form a global village. Never in the history of mankind was contact so easy. Every country and every continent is engaged in continuous communication. However, it is very doubtful that this way of communication has achieved much in the promotion of a dialogue between people and cultures.

Europe with her experience and culture could contribute to a global dialogue for a better understanding between nations and people.

Our times demand that Europe becomes more powerful. It is imperative that Europe should create the necessary structures for her unification and thus to allow herself to have a strong political presence worldwide.

It is time for Europe to have its own independent voice, a political strategy. A foreign and cultural policy.

To bring about a debate, based on cultural knowledge, one needs to recognize that Europe has a great deal to say concerning the understanding between peoples, their cultures, and their dignity and for the sake of peace to work for the good will and betterment of all mankind.

Spyros Mercouris,

Honorary President of the Network of Cultural Capitals of Europe,

Co-ordinator of the First European Cultural Capital - Athens 1985,

Liverpool, 17 October 2008