Remarks by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko At the Opening Session of A Conference on Intercultural Dialogue and Internal Security

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The organisers of this conference have brought together a remarkably authoritative and knowledgeable group of policymakers and thinkers, from Austria and the Western Balkans. A formidable intellectual weight is being brought to bear on the topic, and because of this I hope that this gathering will produce useful insights and constructive new thinking on a subject that affects all of us.

It is significant that the conference began yesterday with visits to the places of worship of four of the world's great religions – famously within a short stroll of one another in central Sarajevo – as well as the Museum of History.

This highlights an important fact about Bosnia and Herzegovina that tends too often to be forgotten – and this is the fact that for most of its history this society has been a model of

peaceful coexistence among different cultures. It has been a home of creative and often innovative intercultural dialogue.

The terrible events of the early 1990s are routinely held up as a dire warning of what happens when intercultural dialogue breaks down. This is understandable.

But I think we should also remember that this society has a fund of positive lessons about cultural and communal harmony that it can share with the rest of the world.

The first lesson is that cultural and communal harmony is possible.

The tragedy of our times is that because of the murderous activity of a handful of zealots, a substantial segment of political opinion around the world is beginning to question whether different religious and cultural groups can really get along.

Of course they can.

Throughout history, we have seen many terrible things done in the name of religion. And these things have been done by people who failed to understand one of the central tenets of the faith they claim to champion.

I believe it is absolutely imperative that all people of faith set out to proclaim this primacy of love – it can contribute to social harmony, no matter what the religious and cultural differences among people may be. It is the antidote to the hatred and mistrust that now bedevils intercultural relations around the world.

I cannot count the number of times people from Bosnia and Herzegovina have told me about incidents during the terrible years of the early nineties when neighbours offered shelter and protection to families from a different ethno-religious community.

Now, if we accept that the authentic message of the great religions is one of love, not hate, can we say the same about cultures? Can chauvinism, for example, be just as authentic as tolerance?

Again, I believe the facts stack up preponderantly on the side of the good.

Chauvinism, the record shows, is cultural failure not cultural victory.

I have a little test that I apply to people when their patriotism becomes wearing. If they said the same things about themselves that they say about their country – for example, that it is unique, superior, unusually complex and sophisticated and so on – if they said these things about themselves, what impression would they give?

Invariably, it would be that this person is vainglorious and insufferably conceited.

The displaced narcissism of chauvinists has done much harm throughout history.

The authentic voice of culture is wise and tolerant, not strident and ugly – a fact to which the literature, music and art of the Western Balkans prodigiously testifies.

When we look at the challenges facing Southeast Europe, I believe it is exceptionally important that we keep in mind that this is a part of the continent where cultures have co-existed for centuries in a complex and creative relationship that has succeeded much more often than it has failed.

This relationship should be celebrated. It has produced a society in which civic values rarely seen in other parts of Europe – hospitality, neighbourhood solidarity, *merhametluk* – continue to thrive, even after the tragedies of the 1990s.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans have much to

teach the rest of the world about communal harmony, and I hope that this conference will help to make some of these useful lessons more widely known.

Thank you