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CSC Briefing on Intercultural Dialogue within the European Union

INTRODUCTION

This year, intercultural dialogue has gained prominence on the institutional agenda of the European Union. Although culture is a policy area where Member States enjoy exclusive competencies, there are growing expectations that the Union will take the lead in a number of processes related to it. Just a few months ahead of the launch of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, a serious European Union level discussion on the theme has begun. European identity and management of cultural industries illustrate the broad spectrum of issues which are tackled under this heading.

FIRST EUROPEAN STRATEGY ON CULTURE

In May 2007 the European Commission approved its first ever strategy document on culture, a Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world. It sets priority areas and a program of the Commission for the next period of time. The communication outlines the following strategic objectives:

- promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue;
- promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs;
- promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations.

The communication proposes the open method of coordination (OMC) as the method for EU-level cooperation in this area. The OMC consists in agreeing on common objectives, regularly monitoring following up progress towards them and exchanging best practices and relevant data in order to foster mutual learning. The OMC is already used as a soft method of co-operation in several policy areas (e.g. social inclusion, education, employment and youth).

FIRST CULTURAL FORUM

In order to properly prepare any political decisions following the publication of the Commission strategy document, the Portuguese EU Presidency organised a Cultural Forum in Lisbon on 26-27 September.

Stakeholders

The forum, which was open to the public, brought together around 300 participants from the institutions, civil society, cultural industry and from the churches. The forum was, among other objectives, considered as a test case in organising an open and transparent dialogue with civil society. The most active European NGO clearly identified with the theme of intercultural dialogue is the Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue. The platform has successfully been building its profile as 'the' civil society partner of the European Commission for intercultural dialogue.

The presence of all relevant European Commission officials, including the Commissioner in charge of cultural affairs, Jan Figel, and the President José Manuel Barroso, showed the strong commitment on the part of the Commission to make culture and intercultural dialogue an important element of EU action. The forum participants also met with the Culture Ministers of all 27 Member States who held an informal council meeting the following day. During the last session of the forum the findings of the event were presented to the Commission and the Culture Ministers.

The Council of Europe, UNESCO, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions were also represented at a high level.

Discussions

The Commission representatives highlighted culture as a significant element of the European integration process. Culture, and in particular the intercultural dialogue, is increasingly seen, along with economy and politics, as a pillar of the European integration process. Culture is also regarded as a means to overcome the existing gap between the political institutions and society.

The discussions at the Cultural Forum focussed on the main areas of controversy and debate (different paradigms present in the dialogue) :

- Twofold nature of culture: economic and symbolic

A significant number of participants represented the 'cultural industry' (film and theatre producers, managers of culture etc.) and the economic dimension of culture was therefore emphasized on several occasions. This directly related to questions such as who manages 'culture' and who 'creates' 'culture'?

- Relation between intercultural and interfaith dialogue

According to the representative of the Church and Society Commission present at the forum, the religious component was seen as a part of intercultural dialogue and there seemed to be openness towards involving churches and religions. However, the low number of church-related participants and the lack of competence in this matter among

the delegates prevented a thorough discussion. Overall, it is seen as the task of the churches to show where and how their involvement can materialize.

- Instrumentalisation of culture

The forum also discussed whether the current trend represents an attempt to instrumentalise culture for the sake of furthering the EU Lisbon objectives.

- Support for cultural diversity

Support for cultural diversity was identified as a crucial element of any 'real European policy' in promoting intercultural dialogue. This requires a double strategy: First of all, diversity should not be understood as a threat, but as an enrichment of society. Secondly, strategies for peaceful living together should be promoted.

All in all, the forum participants welcomed the Commission document. Even if the culture agenda was assessed as somewhat too idealistic, it was, nevertheless, considered as a meaningful text worth adopting by the Council of Ministers. This recommendation of the forum was conveyed to the political representatives in the final session. The Portuguese EU Presidency aims at reaching an agreement over the cultural agenda objectives at the Cultural Affairs Council on 15-16 November 2007.

Soul for Europe

A prominent place in the forum was given to the Soul for Europe initiative. This can be interpreted as a wish to give intercultural dialogue a spiritual dimension. The NGO now bearing the name Soul for Europe has, however, nothing to do with the initiative which used to be linked with the Ecumenical Centre in Brussels. The 'new Soul' is, nevertheless, quickly filling the gap opened by the disappearance of the 'old Soul.' Whether the decision to close down the churches' activity under this heading was premature, might now give rise to self-criticism.

EUROPEAN YEAR OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE 2008

As is well-known, the European Union (EU) has labelled 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. That year will attempt to enhance the visibility and profile of best practices and processes in the field of intercultural dialogue and to define a sustainable strategy beyond 2008. Labelling 2008 as the year of intercultural dialogue and the following year 2009 as the year of creativity, clearly indicates the desire to promote dialogue on culture as a significant element of European policy.

The following specific objectives have been set for 2008:

- raise the awareness of all those living in the EU, in particular young people, about the importance of engaging in intercultural dialogue;
- identify and share best practices to promote intercultural dialogue especially among youth and children;
- foster the role of education in teaching about diversity, increase understanding of other cultures, highlight the role of media in promoting equality and mutual understanding;

- enhance the profile of all community programmes and actions contributing to intercultural dialogue and ensure their continuity; and
- contribute to exploring new approaches to intercultural dialogue involving cooperation between wide range of stakeholders from different sectors.

National Strategies

As part of the preparations for the year 2008, the Commission asked EU Member States to devise National Strategies for the European Year 2008. The National Strategies provide the national context and priorities, and set out measures targeted at involving civil society and the communication sector as well as steps to be taken in the field of education. The National Strategies are published on the Commission website for intercultural dialogue.

CSC INVOLVEMENT

CSC is together with the Commission of Bishops' Conference of the European Community (COMECE) planning a joint project on Muslims and Europe. The initial idea is to hold a series of seminars on political questions related to Muslims with Muslim representatives at the European Parliament. In addition, CSC monitors and take parts in other activities related to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Besides the European Union, CSC is deeply involved in the Council of Europe work on intercultural dialogue. Information on that work is available at the CEC website on intercultural dialogue: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/intercultural.shtml>

MORE INFORMATION

The official Commission website for intercultural dialogue:
http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/dialogue/dialogue_en.html.

The website for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008:
<http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/>

Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalising world:
http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/communication/pdf_word/COM_2007_242_en.pdf

The website of the Cultural Forum: <http://www.culturalforum.pt>



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