



“Reconciler of Faiths: Europe’s Twenty-First Century Task”

Address to  
The OSCE Chairmanship Conference  
on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims  
Session 5

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Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This OSCE Chairmanship Conference is playing an important role in advancing the dialogue between Islam and the West. Allow me therefore to publicly express to our host, the OSCE’s Chairman-in-Office and my dear friend, Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, my appreciation for the organization of this high-level event and for the generous hospitality of the Kingdom of Spain during these proceedings.

Islam has been present continuously in the Balkans for more than six hundred years—and the people who embraced this global faith have been here since records began to be kept. In Serbia, the relationship was not always an exemplary one, especially in the Ottoman era and in the first decades of Serbia’s renewed independence. Oppression and inequality were present, tensions arose, and misunderstandings were common. This is part of Serbia’s historical legacy, and are working hard to correct the mistakes of the past.

But for about one hundred years, Muslims and Christians have for the most part lived together in peace in the Balkans—the two tragic exceptions being World War II and the period of the 1990s. But the overall trend demonstrates how awful those two aberrations truly were. For in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, slowly but surely, the liberal values of trust and compromise began to expand their influence. And trust bred respect of differences, while compromise came to inhibit violence. The body politic gradually understood that agreement and peace were superior to tension and strife, allowing the democratic spirit to take root.

Unfortunately, the 1990s were a dark time in the Balkans: civil war and ethnic cleansing engulfed the region. Yet today, multifaceted reconciliation efforts by our respective democracies are well underway—as the unwavering commitment by all the countries in the region to fully cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former-Yugoslavia clearly demonstrates. Of course, there is still some way to go, but I believe we are on the right track.

Now, as we all know, Slobodan Milosevic did everything in his power to de-stabilize the region, and brought great misery to Serbia and the surrounding states. Think only of the horrors of Srebrenica.

But even *he* did not attempt to spark tensions between the approximately 240,000-strong Islamic community in central Serbia and the Christian, mostly Orthodox population of some eight million. Few anti-Islamic incidents took place in Serbia then, and fewer still since his democratic overthrow in October 2000.

Serbia continues to constitutionally guarantee freedom of religion. Our new, modern, democratic Constitution prohibits, *inter alia*, discrimination on the basis of religion, and our laws envisage severe punishment for religiously-incited violence and similar hate crimes.

And in accordance with the law, recognized religious communities—such as our Muslim community—are guaranteed the right to perform religious rites in public, and to establish and manage religious schools, including madrasses and universities, as well as social and charitable institutions. In fact, the Government of the Republic of Serbia has invested heavily in updating and expanding the infrastructure and activities of Serbia’s Islamic community.

In short, we are working hard to enhance the tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance, and we expect to remain a regional model of inter-faith coexistence and dialogue.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Solving the question of Islam in Europe is vital to our future—to the way Europe sees itself, and to the way it is perceived in the world, especially in the Muslim world.

Let me therefore conclude by speaking to you of what I have called the “grand idea of Europe”—namely that democracy is interdependent with individual liberty, the rule of law, human and minority rights, and tolerance of differences.

Underlying this grand idea was and remains the express intent of its proponents to establish and maintain Europe as the *reconciler of nations*.

The institutions of Europe have acted as a democratic binding agent that has, incredibly, defeated the divisions that plagued this continent for more than a millennia. And Europe has done so peaceably, through incremental steps supported by an unwavering conviction of the power of values such as tolerance and dialogue, compromise and concession, and of course, consensus-building.

Since its inception, the European project has built up credibility by delivering sustainable prosperity, while at the same time transforming entire societies without robbing them of their distinct identities.

Reconciling nations characterized the noble endeavor of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And while work remains to be done, in my opinion, this great civilizational project is well on the way to success. With the accession of all the countries of the Western Balkans, the construction of a Europe whole, free and at peace will be largely complete.

But there is a larger, even more daunting task that awaits Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it is directly related to the theme of this conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For Europe to maintain its credibility at home and throughout the world, it must begin a parallel process of reconciliation.

Europe must become the world's leading *reconciler of faiths*.

I see two main components to the fulfillment of this task.

The first concerns Europe's relations with its own growing and increasingly diverse Muslim community.

We must pool our efforts, combine our resources, begin to share in earnest our best practices, and start to really think creatively, in order to truly integrate the Muslims that live in our countries into the mainstream of our societies. This has to become one of the principle goals of all European states and all pan-European organizations in the next decade, perhaps beyond.

By integration I don't necessarily mean assimilation. But I mean that we have to eliminate the economic, social and political marginalization of the growing community of Muslims in Europe. And we have to do a much better job of spreading the values of the "grand idea of Europe" throughout our Muslim communities.

But we must also do everything in our power to make sure that extremism no longer flourishes in our midst. And this requires facilitating intra-Islamic dialogue, that is, helping to transform Islam's misperceptions about *us*, our societies, our way of life, and our intentions. For if trends continue, we will have created an increasingly restless, radicalizing underclass that could very well bring down the entire European project we have worked so hard to build.

If we succeed in overcoming this grave challenge to the European construction, then we can tackle more successfully the second component of Europe's task of reconciling the faiths: unreservedly engaging the Muslim world *outside* Europe, especially in its Middle East heartland.

The reason is simple. For just as Europe was the focus of the quest for peace during the Cold War, so the Middle East is the ultimate theatre of significance in this part of the 21st century.

My basic point is that by combining the two parts of the reconciler capacity of Europe—as reconciler of European nations, and as the reconciler of faiths *within* Europe—we can play a leading role in forging a 21<sup>st</sup>-century compact of peace, security and prosperity in the Middle East.

A unique historical opportunity to overcome the legacy of mistrust between these two great civilizations is rapidly approaching. And it must not be squandered.

For the ultimate issue is building the future platform upon which the relationship of coexistence, tolerance and understanding between Islam and the West will be consolidated.

Recent blunders on the global political scene notwithstanding, I believe that only Europe will be able to credibly engage the world of Islam in the quest to find the right formula for the future—because only Europe will have built up the necessary credibility in the eyes of the Muslim Middle East to see the engagement through to a successful conclusion. Because of our double role of reconciler of nations and reconciler of faiths in Europe.

Of course, building a firm partnership between the civilizations is a two way street. We must reach out to Islam in a way that makes it good for Islam to reach out to us. And then we must build—build together.

We must reconcile the faiths. The survival of all that we have worked so hard to create out of the ashes of the Second World War rests on our success to come.