

Opening address

Tibor Navracsics, European Commissioner for Education, Youth, Sports and Culture

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak at your conference. I am very pleased that this important event is taking place during the European Year of Cultural Heritage that we are celebrating in 2018 across the continent. This Year is our chance to rekindle a sense of belonging to our shared European space and open up opportunities for people from all backgrounds to experience what it feels like to be European.

This means that we need to reach people, especially young people, where they are, in their communities: small villages, towns, cities and capitals. The European Year is as much about Kőszeg, about the people who live here, as it is about Veszprém, the city I come from, and the many other big and small communities around Europe.

The Year allows us to delve into our traditions, the memories and monuments of our past. From these memories, we can learn a lot about what is important for the future. We can raise awareness of the many cultural influences that have shaped our identities. We can reconnect with our roots as Europeans. And we can promote innovation while respecting the historical value of heritage.

And Interpret Europe can have a big impact on how people interact with cultural heritage. Sometimes learning about heritage can be more effective if it takes place outside the classroom – right where events happen and people live. This can be experienced through guided walks in towns, exhibitions in galleries or visits to natural beauty spots. To a great extent, this experience of hands-on heritage interpretation is the link between education and cultural heritage.

It also fits very well with one of my priorities for the Year: to focus on children and young people. Cultural heritage is a bridge from the past to the future, and who better to build this bridge than young people?

When we kicked off the European Year of Cultural Heritage, we gave young people the opportunity to interpret heritage themselves via the social media platform Instagram. We launched a competition for photos showing a tradition and explaining what it meant to the young people involved. The winning photo was of a beautifully lit bridge at Florence's annual light festival. This competition showed very clearly that young Europeans are not only interpreting heritage very creatively, but that they identify themselves with the very idea of a common cultural heritage.

Doing this, they make a very powerful point: that a European identity, far from threatening our other identities, actually enriches them. Many young people seem to feel intuitively that embracing a European identity complements and strengthens our local, regional, and national identities. That in this way we become part of a community of millions who have such rich histories and interwoven cultures. By adopting a European identity we can share all of this and contribute to the evolution of Europe's shared cultural heritage.

I developed my own European identity under very different circumstances than today's young generation. It was 1980, and I was on a family holiday to East Berlin. I was incredibly excited to go! And of course, this being the dark days of the Cold War, we could not access West Berlin. We did not have the 'right' passports. All I could do was look over to the West from the top of the TV tower in the Eastern part of the city. I could not reach out to people less than five kilometres away.

When the communist regimes collapsed some years later, I remember the joy of seeing Hungarian men, women and children, and people from other countries, finally reuniting with our fellow citizens in the West. Finally, we were free and able to express ourselves politically, culturally and artistically

without fear of reprisal or arrest. For me, this freedom, this possibility of broadening our horizons and connecting with each other is at the heart of what it means to be European.

I am fortunate enough to have had this transformative experience, as I suppose many of you have. But it is not a given. Not everyone is willing to embrace their multiple identities – or even aware of how to take the best from this.

What can we do to help foster a European sense of identity and create a more social cohesive society? How can the European Year of Cultural Heritage support this?

Well, I believe that by celebrating, exploring and cherishing our tangible and intangible European cultural heritage, we will show more people that there is more that unites us than divides us. This unity is derived from our shared heritage, our common historical experiences and our common European values which we should take extra effort to promote: respect for human dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the respect for human rights – to name but a few. This unity takes nothing away from our diverse personal, national and cultural experiences.

With the Year truly underway, there are many possibilities to become involved. We are soon going to select the winners that will receive funding from a call for projects under the Creative Europe programme, focusing specifically on cultural heritage. I look forward to the many ideas that will come from this work, and that will hopefully inspire many of you to keep bringing European cultural heritage to the forefront.

Finally, I am confident that the European Year of Cultural Heritage will help us have an honest debate about the shared values that connect us and that make us stronger.

Thank you.