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Address by
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the Round Table of Ministers of Science

“Rebuilding Scientific Cooperation in South Eastern Europe”

UNESCO, 24 October 2001

Excellencies,
Distinguished Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this Round Table on “Rebuilding Scientific Cooperation on South Eastern Europe”. For UNESCO, it is a challenge as well as a natural obligation to address a situation characterized by the disintegration of research networks and scientific cooperation infrastructures during the past decade. This process has so badly affected scientific productivity that, unless it is brought to a halt rapidly, it may have long-term adverse effects on the economic development of the entire region.

But before going any further, let me try to put today’s event into its context. I shall then briefly outline what I believe this Round Table may be expected to achieve today.

Through its Regional Office for Science and Technology in Europe (ROSTE), located in Venice, and with the generous support provided by the Italian Government, UNESCO has been assisting for over twelve years the scientific communities of Central and Eastern Europe in adapting their institutions to the deep political and economic changes that have taken place since the end of the Cold War. I am happy to note that the rhythm of our activities in the field of science has recently stepped up.

On the occasion of the World Conference on Science, held in Budapest in June/July 1999, UNESCO organized a meeting of Central and Eastern European science ministers and senior experts in science policies. The participants recognized the importance of regular consultations on science policy-making and stressed the need to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western Europe in research strength and capacity. Four months later, a second meeting was organized in Paris on the occasion of the 30th session of UNESCO’s General Conference and within the framework of the follow-up to the World Conference on Science.

About one year ago, I was pleased to discuss with Professor Stig Strömholm, President of the *Academia Europaea*, and Professor Enric Banda, Secretary-General of the European Science Foundation, ways and means of combining our efforts in South Eastern Europe with a view to preparing a set of coordinated activities that would facilitate the reconstruction of scientific cooperation networks in these countries. Subsequently, a conference on this subject was held at UNESCO’s Office in Venice in March 2001, which focused

on country presentations, on the present state of collaboration and on the potential to develop cooperative action in strategic fields of research.

It is on the basis of these initiatives that the idea of organizing the present Round Table was born. I am pleased to see that the *Academia Europea* and the European Science Foundation have joined UNESCO in preparing this meeting. I am also happy to note that Professor Herwig Schopper, former Director-General of the European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN), has been closely associated with the enterprise from its very inception.

Our gathering today should also be seen in the framework of the enlargement process of the European Union and in the perspective of the eventual integration of the South East European countries. For all countries of the sub-region, the development of this perspective represents an important milestone and is considered a top national priority. In this context, I would like to extend a warm welcome to the representatives of the European Commission and of the member states of the European Union.

Some further efforts, of course, need to be made in order to obtain the full cooperation of the Council of Europe and the NATO Science for Peace Programme as well as various non-governmental organizations. A special effort should be made to strengthen our relations with the Stability Pact and to cooperate as active partners in the planning and implementation of science policies and related projects. Establishing partnerships and creating synergies are a matter of crucial importance. I can assure you that UNESCO clearly recognizes the risks and disadvantages of isolated initiatives. For its part, UNESCO has already provided assistance of various kinds to South East Europe but we recognize that these efforts need more systematic integration.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like now to broaden my remarks to cover not only science but also UNESCO's other fields of competence. We all know that the dramatic deterioration of the educational, scientific and cultural situation in South Eastern Europe has arisen from the conflicts that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia and from the long and sometimes difficult transitions in process. The crisis in Kosovo has had particularly far-reaching consequences. The reconstruction of the educational, scientific and cultural infrastructures and an enhanced international cooperation in these fields are becoming as important as the search for a political settlement.

In fact, I believe that sustainable peace, stability and development are not possible without a dramatic improvement in all the fields of UNESCO's competence. That is why I have decided to establish an interdisciplinary task force to focus on South East European issues. The main function of this task force is to develop a coherent and integrated strategic approach to guide UNESCO's strengthened cooperation with its South East European Member States. A comprehensive policy paper for this purpose has been prepared by the task force, highlighting such priority areas as education for democracy, the creation of scientific networks, cultural diversity and independent media. The policy paper will be published shortly.

I am happy to note that the science-related subjects you will be dealing with today have found a prominent place in that policy document: concrete projects on life sciences, environmental sciences, computer technologies, materials science, and selected aspects of social science for sustainable development have so far been identified as priorities for international cooperation. Some of the small-scale projects may be submitted directly to the competent organizations in order to become quickly operational in the coming months. Other projects may require concerted efforts by several organizations and national authorities.

Recently, I had discussions with senior representatives of the European Commission in regard to South East European issues. I am pleased to announce today that I shall organize, during the first quarter of 2002, a high-level meeting with the participation of decision-makers from South East Europe and high officials from the European Commission and the Stability Pact with a view to coordinating our actions in the the fields of education, culture and science in the Balkans. This meeting will be a natural follow-up of other cooperative initiatives such as the Conference on Development and Security in the Adriatic and Ionian region, held in Ancona, Italy, on 20th May 2000.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that this meeting today is not simply one of a sequence of such meetings but becomes a special moment for articulating serious intentions and for determining concrete action. This is the right time for action and boldness. Let us take this opportunity to show that both are possible. The communique that you are invited to approve today will, I believe, show the way forward for us all.

Together, we stand a good chance to succeed in making a significant contribution towards generating changes that are both necessary and desirable. I am confident that you, distinguished delegates, will be able to strengthen the credibility of the enterprise by giving it the indispensable political support and follow-up it requires.

Accept my best wishes for a successful outcome of your deliberations.