

DOC ID	GREET_03
LANGUAGE	ENGLISH
ORIGINAL	Serbian



Right Reverend Bishop Hill, members of the Presidency, Executive Board and delegates of the General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches, your eminences, ladies and gentlemen!

It is an honour to have the opportunity to greet you today and express my delight that Novi Sad, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Republic of Serbia are hosts of such a distinguished and, surely, productive gathering at multiple levels as the session of the General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches is.

I hope I would not sound pretentious if at the very beginning I express my conviction that our country, its Northern Province and, finally, this city, is the right place for hosting such an event. Let me give you a few facts that I believe corroborate this convincingly:

The Republic of Serbia, pursuant to its Constitution, is a secular country. However, at the same time, it is also a country that leaves maximum room for the activities of churches and religious communities not only in a declarative way but a substantial way of everyday life. It also provides them significant institutional support at all government levels – national, provincial and local.

On the other hand, exactly here in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, on behalf of whose government I address you today, through the centuries that are behind us, probably more intensely than anywhere else, the lives and fates of the people belonging to many different nations and confessions intertwined. The turbulent historical events often made said intertwining difficult, sometimes dramatic, but all these temptations were overcome. That is why today Vojvodina is a multiconfessional, multiethnic and multicultural territory that is unique, I would say, not only in Serbia and the region that our country belongs to, but throughout Europe!

Without pretensions to give a comprehensive and final answer to the question of why this is so, allow me to share with you a personal belief which, in my opinion, could be at least part of this answer:

Just as throughout Europe, the Christian culture is what essentially defines, first and foremost, the moral pattern which has been, in this territory as well, passed from one generation to the next for centuries and which prevails in the generation that lives here today as well. That is why I believe that this Christian moral imprint which we all bear is one of the key links which in Vojvodina connects people belonging to various nations and confessions and constantly reminds us that respect, tolerance and harmonious coexistence do not have and cannot have an alternative.

This, of course, does not imply that anybody else – the majority, Serbs, or people belonging to more than 20 national minorities – should give up their own identity and its features. On the contrary! It, in fact, implies that we are all obliged to support the preservation of the identities of all others who live here with us in a manner in which we preserve our own national, confessional, cultural and every other identity. And we actually do this and will continue to do this during the times that are ahead of us. And not just at the level of hollow words, but at the level of everyday, pragmatic and decisive political action. It is this particular action that turns the approach into real, authentic life of almost two million inhabitants of our province.

A significant segment of the action is also mutually beneficial cooperation and fruitful dialogue with churches and religious communities, Vojvodina inhabitants belong to. And this has been carried out through competent provincial secretariats and at the level of the Provincial Government as a whole. It is, and certainly will remain, one of our key programme priorities.

I believe that such determination is also immanent to the principles of dialogue, the building of peace and reconciliation, protection of human rights and justice and other universal principles which the Conference of European Churches that you represent, has for almost six decades now represented and persistently advocated for. Therefore, in us you can find both true hosts and sincere partners, who are willing to contribute as much as possible to the realisation of those principles.

Please allow me, esteemed friends, to also take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Conference of European Churches as a whole and to all its members individually, for the support they provided to our country at the difficult times and great temptations it went through during the past decades. The temptations were many and unfortunately they are not behind us completely. This is exactly why the support of the true friends, who believe in the same moral values and who fight for them consistently and persistently, is even more important and more precious.

During the next few days, which you will – to our great pleasure – spend here, you will address extremely important issues. It will for sure be very useful not just for your organisation, but to all of us. There is something I feel a great need to particularly thank you for, and it is that you will - remembering the injustice committed in 1999 – organise prayer and procession near our Danube bridges, which were brutally destroyed during the barbarian, dehumanised and, I would say Godless times.

You will find them erected again.

As a proof that – just as the two-millennium tradition of our Christian civilisation has been teaching us– EVIL cannot permanently triumph over GOOD.

And, yes, in the end, GOOD always wins.

Once again – welcome to Novi Sad, Vojvodina and Serbia!

