RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COORDINATION
OF DIGITISATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE
IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

Preamble

The enormous richness of the cultural and scientific heritage and knowledge resources in Europe, and in particular in the South-Eastern Europe, forms the collective and evolving memory of our diverse societies. It therefore demands that the highest attention is paid to its knowledge, preservation and promotion.

The advent of the Information Society and the diffusion of the new information and communication technologies affect the policies and programmes of the national states, that should act in a coordinated manner, in order to improve rationalisation and impact of the initiatives for their heritage.

New technologies increased enormously the range of possibilities for the organisation and storage of data about cultural and scientific heritage to improve access for citizens as well as for preserving SEE cultural heritage.

Digitisation is an essential step aimed at preserving and promoting collective cultural heritage, thus safeguarding cultural diversity in the global environment. Also it could improve the presence of the cultural heritage of the region on the Web, more in accordance with its contribution to the world's cultural heritage.

However, there are a number of barriers that could hinder reaching this objective such as fragmentation of approach and lack of synergies between cultural programmes and IT, obsolescence of formats and technologies, handling of intellectual property rights, lack of simple and common forms of access for citizens.

Digitisation is understood here as a collection of activities including, but not limited to: digital capture, transformation from analogue to digital form, describing and representations of heritage objects and documentation about them, processing, presentation and long term preservation of digitised content.

To make digitisation initiatives truly successful, economic and sustainable over time, several elements have been identified:

o a strong need for political, legislative and institutional strategies and for their harmonisation;

o a need for a stronger coordination at national and better exchange at regional level at policy, programme and project segments;

o integration of activities carried out by research and cultural institutions and integration of services provided by archives, museums and libraries;

o a need to develop awareness of the importance that cultural and scientific assets are catalogued before they are digitised, as knowledge of the heritage is essential for the correct interpretation of the digitised objects;

o a need for guidelines and examples of best practices in order to improve costeffectiveness and quality of the digitisation initiatives;

o the use of standards to support interoperability, accessibility, preservation and security needs in order to improve the wide usefulness, cost effectiveness and long term future of digital resources.

The South Eastern European Countries could benefit from sharing experiences with the current EU Member States through working together on the existing common strengths as well as identifying weaknesses in order to establish a common agenda.

It is in these terms that UNESCO Venice Office in cooperation with the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities identified feasible modalities for addressing the situation of heritage digitization in South Eastern Europe (SEE).

Parallely with this process, following a number of requests and suggestions of the South Eastern European (SEE) member states, UNESCO Venice Office agreed with the Cultural Heritage Protection Office, Ministry of culture of Republic of Macedonia to organise a regional meeting with the following objectives:

1. to asses the current situation in heritage digitization in the countries of SEE;

2. to agree upon a joint and shared strategy;

3. to agree upon the mid-term actions to be undertaken in order to improve the national as well as regional processes of heritage digitisation.

In order to asses the concept as well as the current situation of the level of heritage digitization, each country representative participating in this meeting, presented the paper structured on the questionnaire previously submitted.

All country presentations are enclosed to this document in Annex 3. The discussion that took place in the course of this meeting showed that:

o There is a different level of governmental involvement in digitisation activities in the countries from the region;

o Mass digitisation is still exception in the region;

o The institutions from South-Eastern Europe currently are on various levels concerning expertise and digitisation practices;

o All these lead to heterogeneous setting in the region;

o However, because of the shared cultural and scientific heritage the cooperation on national and regional level is a key issue.

The presentation of the Project Minerva is enclosed in Annex 5. The project had a great impact in creating a common European platform made up of guidelines and recommendations for the heritage digitization in western Europe hence the experience acquired as well as the existing core of professional staff represents an asset to the process of creation of heritage digitisation strategy for SEE.

This experience has not been introduced on a systematic basis in the South-Eastern Europe. At the same time, the knowledge acquired through MINERVA project could catalyse the process of coordination and development of digitisation activities in the region.

The previous initiatives undertaken on the territory of SEE are listed in Annex 4. Very valuable work has been done to promote various aspects of digitization as well as bringing forward the necessity of standardisation and coordination on both national and regional level. Participants in this conference have been carefully selected to include the maximum participation of the achievements in all concerned countries. The contributions referred to this previous experience can be summed up in the following way:

o There is initial informal form of regional cooperation which was developed as SEEDI, the South East European Digitisation Initiative initiated by the Borovets Declaration in 2003,

o Some institutional agreement for cooperation already exist, e.g. there is an official agreement on the level of Academies of Sciences between IMI-BAS (Institute of Mathematics and Informatics of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) and MI-SANU (Mathematics Institute, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts);

o In most cases institutions work on small-scale isolated projects but this means that they already have some initial experience and understanding on the importance of shared regional resources.

The participants concluded that it is necessary to take in consideration the outcomes and integrate them in the future initiatives in the following manner:

o taking measures on expanding, enriching and further developing the already existing cooperation forms;

o sharing good experiences and learning from the unsuccessful ones;

o presenting the experience of successful EU and other international projects in the region;

o involving more experienced organisations in training throughout the region;

o promoting the development of common resources.

Principles

Taking into account all the above premises and considerations, the participants of the Meeting agreed on the following principles:

o **Intelligent use of new technologies**

It is recognised the important role that the new information and communication technologies can play towards a widespread diffusion of culture and knowledge. For this reason, cultural institutions and technological centres will be fostered to work together in developing expertise for an appropriate use of the new technologies with a special reference to the Internet and the Web.

o **Cataloguing and digitisation**

It is recognised that knowledge of the cultural and scientific heritage is essential for taking decisions concerning its digitisation and for interpreting the digitised resources. For this reason, inventorying and cataloguing should precede or accompany the digitisation of cultural and scientific assets.

o **Accessibility**

Accessibility is recognised as a fundamental issue for all citizens, irrespective of age or level of technical understanding. A special priority will be given to people with particular needs. For this reason, the requirements of accessibility in its different aspects will be integrated into all guidelines and recommendations promoted by the participating institutions. These requirements will be developed in the context of international standards for accessibility, as the recommendations produced by the World Wide Web Consortium and others.

o **Quality**

Special attention will be paid to the implementation of quality standards in cultural and scientific content creation and web applications. Quality results achieved through the network will be disseminated and promoted. Support will be given to public awareness-raising events and training initiatives.

o **IPR and privacy**

Importance of balancing the right of access to the scientific and cultural heritage with the need to respect Intellectual Property Rights and the privacy of the individual is recognised. For this reason, the adoption of all the available technical and legal instruments to improve accessibility and overcome legislative and normative barriers is encouraged. Dialogue between cultural and scientific sectors, IPR experts, companies implementing Digital Rights Management solutions and the Content Industries should be encouraged as well.

o **Interoperability and standards, long term preservation**

It is of the highest importance that the digital resources produced are as widely interoperable, accessible and secure as possible. For this reason, the adoption of technical guidelines and open standards will be encouraged to enable the building of e-services that give integrated access to cultural and scientific heritage. The adoption of technical standards can support as well the durability and long term preservation of the digital resources created.

o **Inventories and multilingualism**

Fundamental requirement is to ensure that all citizens can easily find the contents that meet their needs. Knowledge of existing repositories and available digital resources of cultural and scientific interest as well as the careful monitoring of new developments in this sector are necessary prerequisites for the realisation of valuable services aiming to make available digital resources of cultural and scientific interest to the citizens. It is recognised the need to adopt the necessary measures to allow the discovery and access to these resources within a multilingual environment, in order to safeguard the cultural diversity.

o **Good practices**

Promotion of good practices plays a very important role, with particular regard to the following objectives:
- to improve the knowledge of the others;
- to monitor advance as well as emergence of obstacles, through the analysis of what is happening in the other countries;
- to foster the participation of the cultural institutions, stimulating them to present themselves, their policies, programmes and projects.

For this scope, campaigns of data collections in each of the participating countries will be promoted, publishing of regular reports about results and analysis of the gathered data will be encouraged.

o **Cooperation at local, national, regional, European and international levels**

Cooperation is looked for and established with local, national, regional, European and International institutions and organisations, which deals with preservation, access and promotion of cultural and scientific heritage. This initiative will be opened to the various sectors of the civil society such as:
- cultural governmental and non-governmental organizations;
- research and academic sectors;

• private business and industrial sector, particularly with the software, media and content industry as well as IPR protection organisations;

• the tourism sector;

• the educational sector.

o **Training**

Training is considered as an issue of primary importance. Heritage professionals participating in the processes of heritage conservation and management should acquire appropriate skills to understand and perform the necessary procedures of digitization Such training should be provided in both formal and informal way as well as it should be encouraged as a periodic activity.

o **Building the future together: at the forefront of the knowledge society**

Emerging on-line cultural portals represent a very important component in the development of an inclusive Information Society. These portals need to be built on a firm foundation of good quality and interoperability, to meet the real needs of learners, tourists and citizens, as well as the cultural and creative industries. A multitude of different actors, with different skills, interests and economic resources are demanded to meet with the common goal of implementing sustainable services of public interest These implementations should happen within a joint and coordinated approach of all heritage domains.

Proposed strategy for the next three years

Based on the above analysis of the current situation and the discussion that took place in the course of the Regional Meeting on Digitization of Cultural Heritage – Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia, 17–20 March 2005 the participants agreed on the following:

1. Most important pre-requisites that need to be pursued and encouraged in the light of the future international cooperation of the South-Eastern European area are:

a. the coordination of initiatives and programmes at national and regional level;

b. the development of national systems of reference;

c. the creation of stable and acknowledged cooperation between scientific research and cultural heritage sector;

d. the organisation of national campaigns to increase awareness and understanding of the available international standards, catalogues and guidelines;

e. the standardisation in the frame of digitisation of cultural and scientific heritage.

2. Concrete steps to be considered:

a. Establishment of national reference points.

b. Establishment of a regional coordination point having the following tasks/objectives:

i. To facilitate contacts between SEE coordination and EU/NRG;

ii. To set up an action plan based on the Member States' contributions to this meeting;

iii. To establish experts groups on specific topics;

iv. To conduct additional surveys of regional, national and local initiatives;

v. To create a framework to promote inventories and digitisation projects, with regard to the integration of cultural and scientific heritage sectors;

vi. To create a framework for the identification of good practices and compe-
tence centres in the Region;

vii. To encourage the development of common online resources (e.g. authority
files)

viii. To use the Web as communication and coordination tool;

ix. To conduct periodic progress assessment and provide feedback to the parties
involved.

3. The participants to the Meeting also request UNESCO Venice Office to assist
on the following:

a. Promotion of cooperation in the domain of heritage digitization in SEE;

b. Assistance in guidance of the implementation of the strategic development
process;

c. Facilitation in development of a regional process of coordination and training
in the heritage digitisation;

d. By acting as a catalyser in the initiatives of institutional exchange and capac-
ity building, notably referring to the experience acquired by the project Minerva, coor-
dinated by the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities.