

**Welcome Address by the Mayor of Nicosia  
at the Opening Ceremony of the 49<sup>th</sup> General Assembly Conference of the  
Union of the Capitals of the European Union (UCEU)**

**Nicosia, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

Your Excellencies  
Dear Colleagues  
Distinguished Guests

It is my great honour and pleasure to welcome you to the opening of the 49<sup>th</sup> Conference and General Assembly of the Union of the Capitals of the European Union in Nicosia. I would like to extend a particularly warm welcome to the honourable Mayors, Deputy Mayors, elected representatives and all other delegates of the capital cities, members of the Union, and of the capital cities that have been invited to participate in this year's Conference as observers. Last but not least, a warm welcome is addressed to the President of the Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy of the Committee of the Regions of the European Union and to the key speakers at the Conference.

Your presence today in Nicosia underlines the value of friendship and cooperation between the capital cities of Europe. It also expresses the commitment of the leaders of European capitals to continue working closely together, united by their shared values, for the promotion of mutual understanding and solidarity and for an improved quality of life for the benefit of their own citizens but ultimately also of the world far beyond our local communities.

The theme of this year's conference, "**Inclusive and Sustainable Capital Cities**", refers to integrated urban development. The theme is of particular relevance to achieving territorial and overall cohesion across the whole of the European Union, at a time of economic regression.

Europe is nowadays more of an urban society, with four out of five Europeans living in towns and cities. By 2050 urban dwellers are expected to double, surpassing most probably the overall population of the earth as it is today. To fully understand the importance of the local and regional authorities for the European economy, and their potential for the recovery, I would like to underline that they are responsible for one third of the public expenditure and more than two thirds of public investment in the EU, playing thus an important role in finding a way out of the crisis and for the preservation of future economic growth.

Our Conference this year can send a message that at this time of crisis, Europe's capitals will stand for social responsibility; that we all intend to uphold the vision for sustainable and inclusive cities, which cherish and thrive on openness, diversity, innovation and creativity and strive for progress and the participation of all in the entire spectrum of social, economic and cultural life.

The pursuit of sustainable solutions acquires special significance for Nicosia, which faces particular challenges as a result of its longstanding division, in addition to the extensive challenges faced by contemporary European capitals.

Please allow me, at this point, to introduce you briefly to our capital, the heart of the southeastern gateway to the European Union.

Nicosia is a vivid reflection of the past 6000 years in our history. Around 700 BC it became known as Ledra, one of the island's ten city kingdoms, eventually named Lefkosia during the Hellenistic period. For over a millennium it has served as the capital of Cyprus. Located as it is in the geographical centre of the island, it developed into the administrative, political, economic and cultural heart of Cyprus.

The volatile recent past of Cyprus has turned this island, often described in tourist leaflets as "the idyllic island of Aphrodite, goddess of love", into a place renowned for hostile confrontations and conflicts. During the last fifty years alone, Cyprus has experienced anti-colonial struggles, post-colonial instability, the divisive effects of opposed ethnic nationalisms, internal violence both between the two major ethnic groups on the island and within each one, war, invasion, territorial division, and multiple population displacements, all facets of the notorious Cyprus Problem.

The tragedy of our divided country is perhaps felt more intensely in Nicosia.

The division line, which runs through the heart of the city from east to west, splits our town into two separate parts, which have been developing independently of each other, thus causing the disintegration of the city's entity. The Buffer Zone is a relentless obstacle to the development and prosperity of areas along its extent, undermining the centrality of Nicosia and turning it into a "frontier" town. Worst of all this division has for decades deprived the population of the right to free communication and movement. It is a daily reminder of the need to resolve the long-standing Cyprus problem.

Many support that the year 2009 is decisive for the protracted Cyprus conflict, focusing on the new round of direct negotiations that began a year ago after an agreement between the two communities reaffirming the basis of the solution of the Cyprus problem i.e. a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality as it is described in the relevant resolutions of the UN, for one state with one sovereignty, one citizenship and one international personality.

It remains to be seen if optimism is justified. It is though true that the solution of the Cyprus problem is one of the great wagers the international community, and especially the European Union, is called upon to win.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conflict situations the role of cities in bridge-building on issues of everyday life can be catalytic. There is no doubt that the reunification of Nicosia and its citizens hinges on an overall solution of the Cyprus problem. But initiatives from within the local communities can make a major difference in overcoming barriers created by the long-standing division.

Notwithstanding its continuing division, in Nicosia, the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities have been working towards a shared vision and strategy for the

balanced and sustainable development and regeneration of the city, which preserves the prospect of reunification but also caters for current needs of the citizens.

The two communities, by working together, create and strengthen ties and eventually reconsider and reshape old beliefs and misconceptions. They work towards a vision that acknowledges the past but is bold and forward looking; an inclusive vision that acknowledges cultural and ethnic diversity, past and present.

Solidarity and support by the great family of Europe's capital cities to the cause of the reunification of Nicosia and of a joint peaceful future for its citizens, encourage our efforts to continue on the path of building bridges of cooperation across the division; bridges which can facilitate the process of reconciliation and reunification, when a mutually agreed solution to the Cyprus problem is reached.

I am confident that our Conference will be an interesting journey of mutual exchange and learning that will highlight the potential of the capitals of the EU in leading the way for sustainability and inclusiveness.

Καλωσορίσατε στη Λευκωσία. Welcome to Nicosia.

Eleni Mavrou  
Mayor of Nicosia  
UCEU President 2009