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## Combating radicalization through culture - building bridges, uniting nations

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Minister for Foreign Affairs George W. Vella and Minister for Justice, Culture and Local Government Owen Bonnici opened the Senior Officials Informal Meeting on culture under the auspices of the Maltese Presidency. The meeting's aims are to strengthen the relationship between countries in the areas of Culture and Heritage.

Minister Vella said that the Commission Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, entitled 'Towards an EU Strategy for international cultural relations', rightly links culture with our foreign policy. This is because of the way in which culture can be understood as a tool which can reinforce - and even create - mutual understanding between peoples. Minister Vella continued that the EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini publicly commented on the Strategy, by noting that culture can even "help all of us, in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, to stand together to fight radicalisation and build an alliance of civilisations against those trying to divide us." The Minister said that he fully agrees with what the HRVP said, as it is precisely this reciprocity of understanding that we can have for and about one another, that allows us to face down challenges to our identity and shared values.

Minister Vella said that Malta has always sought out opportunities to bridge the gaps in intercultural relations including, but not exclusively, via the interfaith dialogue and understanding, as well as through recognizing the importance of cultural diversity in the Mediterranean via a coherent and integrated approach. Malta's role during its Presidency of the Council of the EU also provides it with a great opportunity to showcase the country's rich cultural heritage to the world.

The Minister said that culture is a clear reflection of our society and has also, through its pluralism, been an asset to pursue the socio-economic development of other countries. Minister Vella said that the assault on cultural heritage has become a reality in recent years: we have witnessed the destruction and theft of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria - including the illegal trade of cultural goods. To protect our cultures, we need more cross-sectoral integration, as well as a more strategic approach. It is clear that this is a crucial time to provide more support. The Minister said: "My Ministry fully supports the proposal of

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the Maltese Presidency for the setting-up of a Friends of the Presidency Group to discuss a strategic approach to International Cultural Relations as set out in the working paper issued last week. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs looks forward to contribute to this forum, along with the cultural diplomacy experts". During his intervention, Minister Bonnici said that today's era is facing new challenges, such as fake news, radicalisation, illegal migration, and cyber threats, amongst others. The Minister emphasised that cultural diversity should serve as a bridge which unites all states in international relations, and therefore we should use it to build peaceful societies. Speaking about peace, the Minister showed pity for the attacks on cultural heritage, which took place in various countries such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Minister Bonnici said: "if we do not act against this heritage destruction, citizens will lose their identity and values." Therefore, Malta will be responding to this destruction by following a framework which focuses on socio-economic and intercultural dialogues.

The Minister concluded by saying that cultural also result in economic benefits which are very important for local economy and employment, whilst strengthening cultural diversity. He said that cultural heritage also gives rise to tourism. Minister Bonnici continued by saying that the Maltese Government carried out a lot of work in various cultural sites, especially in Valletta, which will be the European Capital of Culture for the year 2018. One case in point is the rehabilitation of the Valletta covered market, site of the old marketplace.

Minister Bonnici urged the audience to engage in dialogue, and to contribute to make the European Union a stronger global actor, a better partner, and a stronger contributor to sustainable growth, peace, and mutual understanding



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