

Jean-Claude Trichet: A rich variety of cultures at the heart of Europe

Interview with Mr Jean-Claude Trichet, President of the European Central Bank, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung special supplement of the ECB Cultural Days, published on 4 October 2009.

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1. The ECB Cultural Days have been held seven times since their launch. On three occasions, they have featured countries from eastern Europe. What does eastern Europe bring to Europe and to Frankfurt, in particular?

It is very important for the ECB – with our staff coming from all 27 EU Member States – to discover or rediscover the wealth of European culture in the international environment of Frankfurt and its surrounding area. As you say, it has always been our aim to embrace the whole of Europe, both the old and new members of the European Union. It is no accident that we have welcomed three central and eastern European and three western European countries. Last year, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the ECB, the events involved all 27 EU Member States in order to underline the diversity of European culture. This year, the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, the event takes place against the unique backdrop of the reunification of Europe.

2. You made a speech on European culture in Frankfurt this spring, which explored the link between the concepts of roots, diversity and identity. Did you have the ECB Cultural Days in mind?

Of course. I was very keen to deliver this speech upon the invitation of my friend, Professor Otmar Issing. I profoundly believe that culture is at the heart of the European project. The cultural unity of Europe is based on the recognition of, and an openness to, its cultural diversity. Europe benefits greatly from the mix of cultures. This is the core concept of the ECB Cultural Days.

3. In times of crisis, culture can be seen as a luxury, a remedy or a refuge. The past two years must have been very difficult for you, presenting you with many challenges and a very heavy workload. What works of art helped you to unwind during this period?

Particularly in very demanding and challenging crises, it is important to remain composed, to be able to stand back from immediate events and to develop as sound and as lucid a judgement as possible. I think that, in times like these, it helps more than ever to read a good Ismail Kadare book or a beautiful Heine poem, or to stand in quiet contemplation in front of a Caravaggio painting at the Städel.

4. Turning to the ECB Cultural Days: how did the idea come about and what is the connection between culture and central banking?

I have always felt that there is a profound link between the European Union and its cultural identity. I trust this belief is widely shared by ECB staff and our Executive Board, Governing Council and General Council. When I became President of the ECB, I was very happy to see that this initiative had already been launched by my predecessor, Wim Duisenberg. I was determined to give it renewed impetus.

The event can be seen from three different angles. From the perspective of the ECB's staff and the 27 national central banks of the European System of Central Banks, it is a way of celebrating all the national cultures and being proud of them. For Frankfurt and the Rhine-Main region as a whole, it is a way of appealing to a large, cosmopolitan audience. For Europe as a whole, it is an occasion to celebrate cultural unity and diversity under the auspices of one of its major institutions, the ECB. I should mention that the ECB and the national central bank co-organising the Cultural Days – this year Banca Națională a

România – benefit from the remarkable support of the City of Frankfurt and other active sponsors, whom I would like to thank for their contributions.