**Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth**

**President, Prime Minister,**

**Dear Dubravka,**

**Mayor,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

First, let me apologize for not being with you for this ceremony. You can nevertheless expect me quite soon to celebrate with you this important achievement and discover some of the events that Rijeka 2020 is offering.

This year will be vital for Croatia. For the first time, the youngest member of the European Union is hosting its first European Capital of Culture – in Rijeka. Moreover, in the current six months Croatia will be holding its first presidency of the European Union. Congratulations! Two great successes that show the importance of Croatia in the European Union.

It is a pleasure and an honour to celebrate with you the official launch of Rijeka 2020. Throughout this year, Rijeka and its surrounding region, the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, will be under the spotlight and will transform themselves into a port of diversity, highlighting the richness of our diverse cultures but also illustrating cultural elements and values we all share, hosting hundreds of artists and many visitors from all over European Union, to reflect with them on what it means to live in today’s Europe.

I am particularly pleased to see that the programme will also reach out to the Western Balkan Region, addressing shared concerns and giving visibility to its cultural richness and talents.

Let us not forget that culture, identity and values unite us. Located at the crossroads, the heritage of Rijeka clearly shows the influence of different cultures, historical periods, religions and ethnicities. At the time when European Union is facing new and challenging questions, we have to rethink our role and our ways of interacting with citizens as well as to create a common vision for the future.

With this year’s programme, Rijeka perfectly embodies the need to use our creative resources, our fascinating cultures, our amazing heritage and art to strengthen our values, to reconnect our communities and to shape our collective future together.

The European Capital of Culture belongs to the citizens, creators and artists of Rijeka. Let them show us their cultural richness, their works to make us dream, appreciate and cherish the European culture of which Rijeka is part.

I wish you every success in 2020 and I am sure the benefits of this year will spread long beyond.