## Welcome speech by the Nina Obuljen Koržinek, Minister of Culture of the Republic of Croatia, at the Opening of the European Capital of Culture 2020

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the President of the Republic of Croatia Ms Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia Mr Andrej Plenković and myself on the occasion of celebrating the inauguration of the European Capital of Culture, making Rijeka the cultural focus of Croatia and Europe in the year 2020.

Ever since 1985 when the European Capital of Culture project was conceived, it has been highlighting the richness and diversity of the specific European cultures. At the same time, the cities that bear this prestigious title showcase how much culture and art can contribute to transformation and development and how investment in the creative capacities and cultural infrastructure can give rise to the entire social and economic development of a city or region.

Taking all this into account, and in particular the opportunity to create and promote a positive image of Croatia in the European framework through Rijeka – the European Capital of Culture project, the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Culture and other government bodies, especially the Ministry of Tourism, have fully supported this project.

Rijeka as the European Capital of Culture coincides with the Croatian presidency of the Council of the European Union. These two important roles on the European level overlap for the first time, providing us with a unique opportunity to present our vibrant contemporary art and rich cultural heritage to European audiences.

It was during the accession negotiations in 2009 that Croatia expressed its interest in participating in the European Capital of Culture project for the first time, while the decision on designating one Croatian city as the holder of this title was made in 2014. As many as nine Croatian cities applied, which demonstrates just how much our cities were aware of the great potential offered by the title. The final decision, declaring the city of Rijeka and its *Port of* *Diversity* programme concept the European Capital of Culture, was reached in 2016.

From then on, Rijeka has been extensively preparing and today, four years later, we are looking forward to inaugurating the programme that will showcase selected projects from all artistic fields as well as many educational and social activities, international conferences and partnership building, which will ensure the continuation of established collaborations even after the Rijeka ECoC programme is concluded.

The European Capital of Culture project transcends local and regional boundaries, embraces a variety of stakeholders and speaks to all levels of society, rendering culture an impulse for encouraging discussion, interaction and exchange as well as opening new developmental possibilities based on cultural capital and creative energy.

Finally, I wish to underline that production-wise this project exceeds any other Croatian cultural project carried out so far. Therefore, I congratulate all of those who have prepared the programme and who will carry it out - the artistic and production teams, all project managers, partner institutions, artists, all who have in any way participated in conceptualizing and implementing the programme. We wish you every success and I hope that the programme will not only prove to be relevant on the European level, but also that it will provide an unforgettable experience to Rijeka's inhabitants, Croatian audience and all visitors.

To all of Rijeka's present and future guests, on behalf of the Croatian public I would like to take this festive opportunity to welcome you to Rijeka's *Port of Diversity.*

Thank you.