

137th IPU Assembly

St Petersburg, 14 - 18 October 2017

General debate

“Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue”

Honourable President Chowdhury,

Esteemed Secretary General Chungong,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my greatest pleasure to have this opportunity to address you on behalf of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. I would like to extend special gratitude to our host, the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, for an excellent organisation of the 137th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and for their hospitality.

The topic of our session is of great importance for each individual state and for all the countries together, as well as for the international community based on universal values. The very essence of this unity is in the dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Promoting a dialogue between religions and ethnic communities is a precondition for cherishing cultural pluralism. At the same time, this dialogue raises awareness of the fact that various cultures and religions make us richer and stronger.

Each religion and ethnic community has its specific features that should be respected, which is possible only through dialogue. We, the

representatives of citizens need to promote this dialogue and enable engagement of a wide range of people and social groups in it.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Have a look at your colleagues and friends from other delegations around you. We all come from different cultures and nations and we might have different religious beliefs and customs. Being as different as we are, we try hard to represent our peoples and states the best way we can. This does not prevent us from talking freely to each other, respecting and listening to each other. It is the task of us, the Members of Parliaments, to convey the spirit of mutual respect and tolerance to our societies, as an example for cooperation among our countries. Cherishing and promoting dialogue, peace and stability, with full mutual respect of differences, are key values of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Honourable Members of Parliaments,

I would particularly like to underline that pluralism is carefully fostered in Serbia. Our country is a home to numerous peoples of different religions, languages and cultures, and it is among the richest countries in Europe in this respect. The Republic of Serbia promotes this diversity by creating and applying a legal framework protecting rights and freedoms of national minorities and religious communities. Let me remind you that Serbia recognises not only individual, but also the collective rights of all national minorities.

The key laws in this field are the following: the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, the Law on National Councils of National Minorities, the Anti-discrimination Law, as well as the laws related to education and information in the languages of national minorities.

I may proudly say that these laws ensure the application of the highest world standards in the protection of rights and freedoms and that Serbia offers a good example at the regional, European and even at the global level.

Allow me to inform you that in our country there are members of largest world confessions living in it, as well as a large number of national minorities. They elect their representatives in democratic elections to as many as 21 national councils of national minorities for the purpose of enjoying their rights to self-government in the field of culture, education, information and official use of language and script. Moreover, members of ethnic minorities freely use 11 languages when exercising their rights in local and state authorities.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, which I preside, reflects the multi-ethnicity and multi-confessionality of our society. Besides the representatives of the Serbian people, the National Assembly comprises the members who represent the Hungarian, Bosniak and Albanian national minorities within their parties. The Electoral Law of the Republic of Serbia prescribes that, in order to be entitled to representation in the parliament, political parties of national minorities do not need to reach the electoral threshold which is applied to other political subjects, but only the natural threshold.

In addition, members of national minorities conduct political actions not just through national minority parties, but very often within other parliamentary parties in Serbia, including through the largest ruling party which I belong to - the Serbian Progressive Party.

Also, one of the distinctions of my country is the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which I personally come from. Vojvodina has centuries-old

tradition of good relations between numerous ethnic groups of different faiths and languages. There are as many as six officially used languages in the Provincial Parliament, and in whole Europe, more languages are used only in the European Parliament.

Honourable colleagues,

The Republic of Serbia has continuously been improving relations with its neighbours and countries of the wider regions, basing them on mutual respect and appreciation of distinctiveness. In this regard, the National Assembly has been conducting very dynamic activities at the bilateral level, and within a very developed network of multilateral initiatives. We exchange the best practices at all these levels and tend to find new ways to develop cultural pluralism.

We believe to be making a significant contribution to the dialogue within the fight against extremism and fundamentalism. This is necessary in the conditions where the world is facing global challenges such as migration and terrorism that do not recognise national borders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For the Republic of Serbia, cultural pluralism, inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogues are the values that the society needs to protect against discrimination and extremism.

On the other hand, it is these civilisational values that are the bridge towards a better mutual understanding among all cultures and peoples. Thereby, they also provide the best protection against violence in the contemporary society.

Thank you for your attention.