

**Address by Mr Gundars Daudze,
Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Latvia,
at the General Debate
on *Promoting cultural pluralism and peace
through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue*
137th IPU Assembly**

14 October 2017, Saint-Petersburg

Mr. President,

Secretary General,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to take part in the General Debate on a topic that has become increasingly relevant in current realities.

I would like to share with you some insights on how Latvian society has managed to maintain cultural pluralism and peaceful coexistence of various ethnicities. In addition, I will describe the relations among these ethnic and religious groups.

Historically, Latvia has been situated at the geographical and cultural crossroads; many ethnic groups have been living together in our country for hundreds of years. Therefore, through the ages, our society has learned tolerance towards different cultures, lifestyles and beliefs, at the same time preserving and shaping its own unique identity.

Out of almost 2 million of the total population of Latvia, less than 2/3, or 61% are Latvians. More than 25 % are Russians, and more than 12% are other ethnicities. In total, we have 73 different nationalities living together in Latvia.

Schools in Latvia illustrate our approach: the educational system requires mastering official language and learning 2 to 3 foreign languages. Besides, there are schools for national minorities that have a long history of presence in Latvia. These schools are fully funded by the State.

Inter-cultural dialogue is also promoted by strong foreign language learning traditions. I am confident that developing foreign language skills is one of the best ways to promote people-to-people contacts and improve understanding and tolerance to other cultures and ethnicities.

Most of Latvian people know at least one foreign language. For this reason, in the European Union, Latvia takes the third place after

Luxemburg and Lithuania in terms of foreign language skills. What is more, almost 60% of our population know 2 or 3 foreign languages.

A great role in language and culture studies play not only schools, but also cultural centres. German, Russian, Jewish, French, and Danish centres have a long tradition in Latvia, and even a Chinese Cultural centre will be opened soon.

United in diversity, is the motto of the European Union. It underlines how Europeans have united within the European Union, to strive for peace and prosperity. At the same time they are enriched by many different cultures, traditions and languages.

In addition to supporting different cultures and traditions, it is important to preserve and develop the local language. Language should not become a barrier for inter-ethnic dialogue. For Latvia, it is paramount to maintain the unity and integrity of society by having the Latvian language as the official language.

Ladies and gentlemen!

Regarding inter-faith dialogue, it is important to note that, in Latvia, the state is separated from church, and that is stated in our Constitution.

Historically, there are strong Catholic, Lutheran and Russian Orthodox traditions in Latvia. Despite differences, these Christian denominations have managed to develop ecumenical dialogue. At the

same time, historically Latvians have remained tolerant towards other religions, including the Jewish, Muslims and Buddhists.

Equal rights to all people living in Latvia, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, is one of the cornerstones of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.

The Parliament of Latvia has always supported the position of equal attitude, without reference to race, ethnic origin, or religion.

Dear Colleagues!

In this era of conflicts and clashes based on ethnic and religious grounds throughout the world, we need to promote respect for the universal values of humanity, human dignity, and equality. The Inter-Parliamentary Union is a unique format that provides a platform for broad dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy. It is our duty to make the best use of it.

Thank you!