

INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION
137th Assembly
St Petersburg, 14 – 18 October 2017
General Debate on the theme

"Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue"

by H.E. Mr. Demetris Syllouris,
President of the House of Representatives (Cyprus)

Dear Mr. President,

Dear Colleagues,

In today's world, one could argue that cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue constitutes one of the greatest challenges and ultimate goals of the international community. I am referring to a notion of cultural pluralism, which would not aim at intruding in our citizens sense of belonging, national roots, culture and civilization, but rather enrich and add new perspectives and balances for them. It is true, however, that if not approached constructively, inconclusive dialogue between different faith and ethnic communities, using the wrong language, can lead to radicalization, paralyzing forms of conflict and even violence. And, unfortunately, we have all been witnessing, in particular over the last few years, an alarming rise in extreme nationalistic and xenophobic political discourse and subsequent terrorism and ideologically encouraged violence in many parts of the world.

We cannot build strong multicultural societies if we refuse to have reasonable conversations. We cannot plan a more peaceful future if the starting point is suspicion and mistrust. And we cannot build a pluralistic, prosperous world unless we listen to each other, work together and learn to respect our differences. I therefore believe that it is time we push for an even greater and perhaps more radical change in the way we act, in politics and beyond, in order to achieve the pluralistic societies we all envisage and aspire to.

As law makers, we are called to lead by example and promote such legislation and policies that would not result in fear of anything and anyone different, but rather enrich tolerance, understanding and readiness for constructive inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue; a dialogue that can ultimately lead to development, progress, pluralism, stronger democracies and adherence to the rule of law.

Dear Colleagues,

In today's world, people are faced with an overwhelming range of challenges; economic, demographic, migratory and cultural. Challenges, which, if not carefully addressed, can severely hamper any prospect for strong and healthy intercultural societies and peace around the globe. It is therefore imperative we "re-set" our goals, policies and strategies. Starting from schools and reaching out to the eldest citizens, it is of paramount importance to develop, among other, a comprehensive intercultural strategy that would enhance and promote all those parameters that should reflect the important role of cultural pluralism, in turn leading to the achievement of peace.

Coming from a multicultural country, Cyprus, I can say that, despite the Turkish invasion and occupation of part of our country since 1974 that gravely affected social cohesion, we, Cypriots, managed to safeguard to a great extent respect to different people from different backgrounds. Throughout the ages, Cyprus has grown to be a mosaic of different cultures and religions and that diversity has become our great strength. I also have to underline that religion was never a problem between the two communities in Cyprus. The Cyprus problem has its roots in foreign interference. Indicative is the fact that the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus stipulates that the Parliament comprises 80 seats, 56 members are elected by the Greek-Cypriot community, while 24 are reserved for the Turkish-Cypriot community, once the Cyprus question will have been solved, as we very much hope. Additionally, 3 seats are designated for representatives of the smaller religious groups; the Maronites, the Armenians and the Latins. Members of these groups can also be elected to the rest of the seats of the House. We currently have two Members in the House who are of Maronite descent and, in the very recent past, a Member of Armenian descent was elected as President of the House.

Esteemed Colleagues,

The capacity and willingness to generate and sustain dialogue across borders or any dividing lines are pivotal for advancing further on the road to peace, democracy, stability and sustainable development. If we are to move from mere declarations to concrete approaches and practical action at international and national levels, now is the time to decisively commit ourselves in these processes. Our duty as parliamentarians is not only to work actively to adopt laws that

combat racism and xenophobia or promote cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue. Our duty is also to ensure that we work together in order to establish a culture of peace worldwide.

Thank you.