

137th IPU Assembly, St Petersburg

General Debate:

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

Speech by Mr Pol VAN DEN DRIESSCHE (Belgium)

Mister / Madam President, Dear Colleagues,

I wish to join many speakers before me in expressing my thanks to the Russian authorities and in particular the Parliament of the Russian Federation for the excellent arrangements they have made for this Assembly. It is great to be here in this wonderful city.

If I am not misinformed, this Palace in which we are meeting was originally built at the end of the 18th century for Grigori Potemkin in recognition of the fact that in 1783 he had annexed the Crimea (or the Tauric Pensinsula, as it was still known at the time) to the Russian Empire. Potemkin was given the title “Prince of Tauris” and his palace was accordingly named Tavrichesky or Tauride Palace.

It seems painfully ironic to me that we are meeting here when a new annexation of Crimea has made it unthinkable for one of the members of our organization to attend this Assembly. I am referring of course to Ukraine.

At our Assembly in Hanoi, in 2015, the Twelve Group adopted a strong statement on the situation regarding Ukraine. I am sorry to say that, two and half years later, our condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea and of the Russian violations of Ukraine’s territorial integrity remains as valid as ever and

that the prospects of reaching a peaceful settlement in an internationally recognized framework are as dim now as they were then, if not more so.

In his speech at the inaugural ceremony, President Putin pleaded for more mutual respect and for not interfering in other states' affairs, but obviously, even the best of us do not always practice what they preach.

This brings me to the general theme of this debate, which is also about pluralism and dialogue between partners who treat each other as equals. I could not agree more with these lofty principles, but there are some provisos:

First, I find that, very often, the staunchest defenders of the plurality of political, social and economic systems, all equally valid and worthy of respect, are less keen on allowing pluralism and critical questioning within the system that happens to be theirs.

Second, religious or ideological convictions, cultural values and traditions cannot be an excuse for violating basic and universally recognized human rights, as defined in international law, or for interpreting these rights in an idiosyncratic manner.

Let me give you one example.

Sexual orientations and identities that differ from the heterosexual or cisgender standard are frowned upon in many parts of the world and are still criminalized in a number of countries. In Belgium, we do not agree with that. Our parliament believes that LGBTI rights are human rights and advocates the universal decriminalization of homosexuality. We know that these views are not shared by all. But surely no one denies that LGBTI are human beings and as such are

entitled to the same basic rights as all human beings. They do not deserve to be discriminated in areas that have nothing to do with their sexual orientation or identity such as housing, access to health services or employment. They do not deserve to be harassed, violently attacked, arbitrarily detained or even tortured and killed, as happened recently in Chechnya. They do not deserve to be discriminated in any way. Ever.

The Belgian delegation has proposed that our Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights should have a panel debate on this issue at its next sitting in Geneva and we hope that our proposal will be accepted.

Finally, there is no such thing as the right to deny the light of the sun. There is an increasing and to me disquieting tendency to question the best scientific knowledge we have on the basis of religious or other beliefs that long predate that knowledge and, more importantly, have not contributed to it. The creationism promoted by Christian fundamentalists as a rival to evolution theory is a telling example of this, but similar discussions appear in societies with other religious or cultural traditions. Religion must not become an excuse for obscurantism.

Dear Colleagues,

We respect all religions, as long as they are practiced in a peaceful manner. We respect all those who take positive strength from their faith. We respect all those who, from their own faith, engage in a constructive dialogue with other faiths and also with people who do not practice any religion. But we also insist on respect for the separation of state and religion.

Thank you for your attention.