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

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AUSTRIA

- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General,
Fellow Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Cultural differences are a natural aspect of human coexistence. As well as the more obvious cultural differences that exist between people, such as language, dress and traditions, there are also significant variations in the way societies organize themselves, in their shared conception of morality, and in the ways they interact with their environment.

Cultural diversity on the one hand is created by migration, or - in other words - in many cases by crossing country borders. On the other hand cultural diversity also is created by the coexistence of different groups of society that are living within the same borders over a longer period of time.

Pluralism or diversity must be seen as a chance for all of us. A chance to learn from each other, to share different perspectives and to live together with mutual understanding and respect. Also, by learning from each other we can overcome fears, that often develop if we are faced with something we don't know good enough.

Let me focus on three different aspects that I believe are of fundamental importance for a pluralistic and self-determined society: **integration, tolerance, moral courage**

Migration and integration policies in Austria

As you know we only very recently had parliamentary elections in Austria. One of the main topics in the election campaigns was the question of how to manage migration, immigration and of course integration. In other words, these questions clearly affect everyone of us. Let me therefore give you a few basics on the situation in my country.

The year 2015 was a peak year, with 88,340 applications for international protection, more than half by persons coming from Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic.

Following the refugee inflows of 2015, integration policies were debated, funding was earmarked and action points were set, including a **50-Point Plan for the Integration of Persons Granted Asylum and Beneficiaries of Subsidiary Protection in Austria**. It gives special attention to language acquisition, entry into the labour market and an understanding of the rule of law and principles. Courses on values and providing orientation and integration workshops are carried out nationwide. The Public Employment Service spent approx. 75 million euro in 2016 on measures aimed at integrating refugees into the labour market 2016 with an expected budget increase to 90 million euro in 2017.

Following the amendments to the Asylum Act in 2016 and for the purpose of integration support, it is now obligatory for third-country nationals to visit one of the Austrian Integration Fund's centres for seeking integration support immediately after having been granted asylum or subsidiary protection. Asylum-seekers to whom in all likelihood protection status will be granted have the right - but not the duty - to participate in integration assistance measures.

Let me now switch to another important aspect of peaceful coexistence, namely **tolerance** and respect for national minorities.

Volksgruppen

Tolerance, minority rights and non-discrimination are of particular relevance to a modern state if its society wants to live together peacefully in a pluralistic society. The basis of these principles is usually laid down in a country's constitution. A very important part of these principles are the **Rights of National Minorities**. A modern constitution must provide specific legal protection of ethnic groups. From experience we know that the basic principle of equality very often is not enough to protect members of ethnic, linguistic, religious and other minorities from discrimination. For example this is the case when a law doesn't provide the possibility to consider the specific needs of a specific population group.

In Austria there are six national minorities: the Burgenland-Croat, the Slovenian, the Hungarian, the Czech, the Slovak and the Roma. Apart from legal provisions in the Austrian constitution there are several other laws that grant special rights to persons belonging to national minorities such as the National Minorities Act and legislation on national minorities' schools.

An important means to contribute to the respect for diversity is **language**. The **Minorities School Acts** for Burgenland and Carinthia bring about a difference in the school system for the Croatian, Hungarian and the Roma ethnic groups to the regular Austrian school system through the additional languages offered, while at the same time guaranteeing the same quality of teaching as in all other Austrian schools. Apart from these specific school system types for Austrian national minorities, the languages of national minorities are also taught as school subjects within the scope of the general public school system in various types of schools.

Volksgruppenförderung

The National Minorities Act embodies the possibility to promote intercultural activities that foster living together of the national minorities. This is done through financial support to measures and projects designed to preserve and secure the existence of national minorities, their customs and traditions as well as their characteristics and rights.

Combat hate speech/moral courage

Peaceful coexistence is based on respect for each other. Mutual respect is to a great extent based on how we talk to each other. In other words, **using respectful language** can de-escalate situations and even help to prevent conflicts. By the same token it is of fundamental importance to **speak up against discrimination or intolerance** where ever we encounter it.

Hate and extremism on the other hand often grow out of something allegedly quite small such as a despicable remark. Today's tools of modern communication contribute to spread such remarks even faster and wider. In this regard hate speech on the internet has become a growing problem.

What can we as parliamentarians do to counter these tendencies and to contribute to fairness and integration? We as politicians have to act as role models when communicating in parliamentary debates, at public events or when interacting with citizens by using respectful language and speaking up against intolerance and hate.

Let me draw your attention to the **No Hate Speech Campaign of the Council of Europe**. It aims to combat online racism and discrimination, by mobilising young people and youth organisations to promote freedom of expression online by providing a safe space for people to express themselves free from fear of hate speech.

The Austrian Parliament has taken up the focus of this campaign at its **Democracy Workshop** with a topical focus on "diversity, prejudice and moral courage" and by providing workshops on what teachers can do to prevent hate speech on the internet. Also the Youth Parliament discussed the topic Cyber mobbing at its session in December 2015. Other current topics the Democracy Workshop dealt with "democracy against terror", "flight, migration and integration, "racism and prejudice".

The State Secretary for diversity, civil service and digitalisation only recently presented a **study on internet usage and cybermobbing**, showing that nearly 80% of the interviewed persons use the internet daily, and that 50%, amongst young people 75% have already encountered hate postings or cybermobbing. Many people don't know how to react in such a situation or simply ignore these postings because they don't know where to address these incidents. Therefore a new **helpdesk against hatred on the internet** was lunched to help victims, and to have documentation on these cases.

One of my fellow parliamentarians, who took office as President of the Federal Council in the second half of 2016 focussed his presidency on the theme of moral courage. He initiated a campaign called "**digital courage**", creating a platform that interlinks NGOs, activists and politicians to fight hate on the internet. In autumn 2016 a "green book on digital courage" was published on his initiative with input from experts and recommendations for politicians on the topic hate on the internet. This green book was the basis for a **parliamentary enquiry on moral courage**, where representatives from government, parliament, and civil society discussed the problem of hatred and marginalisation on the internet as well as victim protection.

conclusion

Fellow Parliamentarians,
even if we come from different countries and have different backgrounds, we should all be ready to take on the responsibility of providing for a society of solidarity, each action we take must strive for agreement not disagreement, and we ourselves must be the moral role models to restore confidence in politics.

Finally, let me extend my special thanks to our host for the perfect organisation of the 137th Inter-Parliamentary Conference and for the extraordinary hospitality shown to all of us. I would also like to thank the staff of the IPU Secretariat for their tireless work.

Thank you for your attention.