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143rd IPU Assembly
Madrid, 26-30 November 2021

General Debate: “Contemporary challenges to democracy: Overcoming division and building community”

Dear Chair,

At the press conference held on the eve of Human Rights Day on 9 December last year, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said that the crisis induced by Covid-19 had zeroed in on the fragilities and fissures in our societies, failing to uphold the basic human rights. A disease which claimed the lives of millions of people has been politicised, while people's fears around the world have been taken advantage of to implement measures which – in non-crisis situations – would never have passed the public scrutiny.

Still, we should not delude ourselves. The crisis brought on by Covid-19 has merely shed light on the inequalities and abuses of rights that existed well before the onset of the pandemic. We may therefore say with all certainty that democracy founded on human rights and the rule of law has been in a crisis for quite some time already – not only a crisis reflected in populisms or undermined trust into the political establishment, but also a crisis concerning the very concept of democracy and democratic values.

Increased polarisation has also been observed in Slovenian politics and society. It is a challenge we seem not to know how to address properly. The pandemic has shed additional light on this problem, whereby it strongly relied on today's popular social networks. In fact, there appears to be a growing tendency among politicians to communicate mainly through these channels.

I believe that the use of social networks in the political sphere could indeed serve as a means to ensure transparency and provide information to the public. However, it goes without saying that these networks do not reflect what is known as digital democratic processes, but have become platforms for spreading populisms, fake news and hate speech. It is therefore of paramount importance that when addressing the public through social networks we, as parliamentarians, remain committed to fostering a culture of dialogue also online. We should listen to and respect different opinions, and every one of us should make a conscious decision to stop engaging in hateful rhetoric and spreading unverified information and news. Only in such way will we set a good example to our voters.

When winning their trust in the elections, we also assumed the responsibility of providing our voters with a sense of certainty and security. Moreover, we need to strengthen the social capital which will motivate people's participation and involvement in debates of broader social relevance. Last but not least, when exchanging views, we must strictly adhere to the principles of respectful communication, particularly in settings such as the parliament that may have a profound impact on the situation and climate throughout society.

Today, we are searching for answers on how to effectively address the modern challenges of democracy within parliaments. As MPs, we have been given the mandate to seek solutions on behalf of the people and to effectively tackle the common challenges of the entire society and the state, whereby we need to engage in networking and international cooperation. The challenges of today's world go far beyond the individual (and often selfish) interests and seek commitment to safeguard future generations and create better life opportunities for them.

Members of the Slovenian parliament consolidate their term of office by taking an oath of upholding the constitutional order, acting according to their own conscience and doing all in their power for the good of the Republic of Slovenia. Perhaps it is time for us to commit ourselves in our oaths to also and in particular act in the best interests of our planet and our future generations. Otherwise, we may soon reach the point where all other topics of today's debates will become irrelevant.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our world is rushing from one disaster to another as we have allowed it to be dominated by individual interests and not by actions for the common good. Solidarity and sense of unity is what will help us survive the existing and imminent disasters, leading us to a new normal, perhaps a new paradigm in which we will be able to discern better suited ways of cooperation and life, as well as a shared concern for the planet and each other.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union, as the largest global parliamentary organisation, can play an important role in this process, allowing us to join efforts and offering a common insight into possible approaches to tackling future challenges. Let us commit ourselves to safeguarding the principles of equality, cooperation and solidarity, which will help us respond to future crises more effectively.

Thank you.