

## **Promoting peaceful coexistence and inclusive societies: Fighting intolerance**

**Ms. Guoda Burokiene, Head of the Seimas delegation to IPU, Republic of Lithuania**

It is a pleasure to be here with you today and discuss topical matters.

There is a saying that society is only as strong as its weakest member. Ensuring equal opportunities is the basis for an inclusive society and prevention of intolerance. Equal opportunities constitute one of the key values and principles of modern society. The principle of equality of all people before the law is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania and in a number of national laws. Each member of the Lithuanian society has the same opportunities to pursue education, career, and professional improvement and to be active in all areas of political and social life.

Beyond doubt, there is still room for improvement. We still face the challenge of gender equality in the power domain. Lithuanian parliament has 28 per cent of women members and I believe that this figure can and must be higher. However, we are pleased that the Seimas and the Government of Lithuania are headed by women and, not so long ago, a woman served as the President of the Republic of Lithuania for ten consecutive years.

Lithuanian society is homogeneous as Lithuanians account for almost 85 per cent of the population. For hundreds of years, Lithuanians have peacefully coexisted with Polish, Russian, Belarussian and other nationalities. National minorities are an integral part of the Lithuanian society and have long-standing historical and cultural ties to Lithuania. For centuries, national communities have played an important role as they contributed to the creation of the Lithuanian state and to the defence of its freedom and independence.

Just over a year ago, on 24 February 2022, when Russia launched a brutal war in Ukraine, Lithuania, like other neighbouring and European countries, faced a new challenge, a wave of war refugees from Ukraine. These were mostly women, children and the elderly who left their homes in Ukraine to seek a safe refuge from the atrocities of the war. Lithuanians welcomed them with open hearts and many residents shared their homes with them.

In order to continue to build an inclusive and tolerant society and to help Ukrainians fleeing the war, the Seimas has regulated the provision of social assistance to Ukrainian war refugees, enabling them to receive medical care, study in their own language and find employment.

Today, more than 21,000 Ukrainians work in Lithuania and this accounts for half of all people of the working age. Some 71,500 Ukrainians have arrived in Lithuania in total.

We are here today to discuss the building of an inclusive society and fighting intolerance. However, while being here and sharing our experience, we cannot be tolerant of the war in Ukraine, Russia's violation of human rights and freedoms, breaking the principles of international order and disregard for the democratic values. For as long as we are tolerant of the atrocities committed by Russia, no amount of legislation passed could smooth out the cracks in our national societies or our own conscience.

Thank you for your attention.