

Draft Address by Snežana Paunović, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly

146th Assembly of the IPU , 13 - 15 March 2023, Manama

Promoting peaceful coexistence and inclusive societies: Fighting intolerance

Honourable Speakers of Parliaments,

Esteemed Deputy Speakers of Parliaments,

Distinguished Fellow Parliamentarians,

Dear Participants, Colleagues and Friends,

Allow me to begin by congratulating the organisers for their remarkable effort and their generous hospitality.

I highly appreciate the topic of today's debate on Promoting peaceful coexistence and tolerance, as well as inclusive societies. The IPU as the oldest international parliamentary organisation preserves these exact values as its heritage. Respecting these values is a civilizational achievement - protection and promotion of human rights, peace, dialogue and peaceful settlement of disputes, with respect for international law.

The principle of equality is one of the fundamental principles underpinning human rights and freedoms.

The fight for human rights will never cease. Unfortunately, intolerance and discrimination still exist in almost all societies.

Dear Colleagues,

As the famous philosopher Karl Popper once said: "In order to maintain a tolerant society, society must be intolerant of intolerance."

Intolerance is the lack of respect for other people's customs or beliefs, except selfishly for one's own.

Fighting intolerance is not simple. Dialogue, education, and political readiness are necessary if we want to achieve tangible results.

Education, as one of the key and primary means of prevention, is essential for combating intolerance and discrimination. Education promotes inclusion and peaceful coexistence.

States are obliged to take legal measures to fight discrimination, first of all by creating national normative frameworks that would guarantee equal treatment of all citizens before the law. They are obliged to promote the positive values of mutual understanding and respect for human rights.

Numerous indicators confirm that societies that are inclusive show a higher degree of tolerance, and thus in such countries there is a higher level of democracy and peaceful coexistence.

Only by respecting the individuality and uniqueness of others, can we create a more tolerant and solidary world together. By accepting cultural differences, we built a peaceful environment.

Dear Colleagues,

Parliament is the voice of people, it represents all citizens of a country. As parliamentarians, we have a great responsibility to respect the needs of all people, regardless of their gender, age, economic and social status, religious affiliation and all other differences. We need to take our role in fighting intolerance seriously. It is our duty as we are the only state institution that is representative of the entire population.

Extensive reforms in the field of non-discrimination are being implemented in Serbia, with the aim of harmonizing the legal framework with relevant international and European standards.

On the international level, Serbia is a signatory to numerous conventions. We have demonstrated our commitment to respecting and protecting human rights by ratifying 8 of the 9 most important Human Rights Treaties created under the auspices of the UN.

Serbia is an example of good practice as it is the first UN member state to include the principle of "leaving no one behind" from Agenda 2030 in its legal framework.

In addition, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for the period from 2022 to 2030.

The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted other anti-discrimination laws - the Law on Gender Equality, which implies equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities, equal participation and balanced representation of women and men in all spheres of life.

Furthermore, we adopted the Law on Labour, Social Protection, Patient Rights, Police, Youth, the Law on Secondary Education and Upbringing, Higher Education, Advertising, Foreigners, Criminal Code etc....

Our commitment to protecting the rights of national minorities has also been built into the legal framework in the form of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, as well as the Law on National Councils of National Minorities. Serbia respects the rights of all national minorities.

However, today I am going to tell you something today that you will probably hear for the first time at an IPU Assembly. I was born in Kosovo and Metohija. I was born and come from the place where three months ago, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church was banned from entering and hold a liturgy, although the seat of our Patriarchy is there. Where, on Christmas Eve three children were shot at just because they are Serbs. Where one gets beaten up in a street if they hear you speak Serbian language. There are many people like me who for full 24 years now have not been able to return home. Someone has decided that they do not have the right to it. It is our obligation, as responsible people, as parliamentarians, to fight for fundamental human rights, one of which is to be able to live where you were born. We need to listen to each other and not to allow these injustices to be inflicted on people because an individual has decided so. We must not allow that in 21st century, fundamental human rights of a nation are violated – the nation that cannot go to its territory where it has a monastery from the 12th century.

My name is Snežana Paunović and I will be glad if you would understand how anxious I am at the moment when I am telling you that due to someone's decision, I am not able to go back to my homeland because they say it is no longer mine.

Thank you very much