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COUNCIL OF EUROPE, FOR THE OSCE CONFERENCE
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Dear President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to greet you on behalf of more than 600 members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe representing 47 national parliaments of nearly all European states.

We are meeting here at the initiative of the Kazakh Chairmanship of the OSCE and I wish to congratulate the authorities of Kazakhstan, in particular the President of the Republic, on the successful chairing of this huge organization re-grouping member states from three continents. It is a major challenge, but I am proud that a brother Euro-Asian country has been entrusted with such important responsibilities. In this connection, I give my strong support to the holding of the OSCE Summit in Astana.

The OSCE and the Council of Europe share the same values. For me personally, this conference is an excellent occasion to compare our approaches and methods in the field of promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, so that we could make our action more complimentary and more efficient.

As I declared when elected President of the Parliamentary Assembly last January, the foundation of our common European home must be built on an open society based on respect for diversity, not on exclusion, not on discrimination, not on fear and certainly not on hatred.

Having said these words, here in Astana, I must think about the humanitarian crisis in nearby Kyrgyzstan. We witness hundreds of victims and thousands of refugees and displaced persons as a result of ethnic tensions abused for political purposes. Unfortunately, the Council of Europe is not equipped to deal with such emergency situations, but we must be more pro-active before they happen. In the Parliamentary Assembly, we have created a "partner for democracy status" to bring non-member states closer to the Council of Europe values. I am convinced that our involvement could make a real difference and save human lives. We highly appreciate the very positive role of President Nazarbayev who has taken the leadership in the region to help solve the crisis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The increasing intolerance and discrimination in our societies are one of the biggest challenges of the era of globalization. With the consequences of the economic crisis, these problems have become even more acute.

The principles of equality and non-discrimination, which are closely connected, have always been at the heart of the Council of Europe's action, especially since the European Convention on Human Rights was signed sixty years ago. Article 14 stipulates that "the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in the Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground".

Ten years ago, the Council of Europe took a step further by adding Protocol 12 to the Convention. This Protocol foresees a general prohibition of discrimination: the enjoyment of any right set forth by the law (not only by the Convention) must be enforced without discrimination on any ground.

Let us say it clearly: under the Convention on Human Rights and Protocol 12, equality and non-discrimination are the backbone of the Council of Europe's human rights protection system.

Besides these legally binding instruments, the Council of Europe has invested time and resources in information and awareness-raising campaigns to fight discrimination of all kind. I will mention just a few:

"All different, all equal", aimed particularly at the youth, to encourage and enable young people to participate in building peaceful societies based on diversity and inclusion;

"Speak out against discrimination", run in partnership with journalists and media all over Europe, with the aim of creating a "group of friends" in the media to help fight discrimination arising from racist attitudes and prejudices, in particular those targeting the Jewish, Muslim, Roma and traveller communities;

"Dosta!", meaning "Enough!", is an awareness-raising campaign about discrimination against the Roma communities. It was launched a few years ago in some countries of Eastern Europe and very recently in Italy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to fight discrimination, legal instruments are, of course, necessary. However, we must also strive to improve the general climate in our societies. I firmly believe in the importance of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue as the most effective tool for fighting discrimination and promoting mutual understanding. We must eradicate racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all kinds of similar phobia leading to discrimination and intolerance.

Our Assembly brings together representatives of national parliaments which, in turn, are the emanation of the political, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in our societies.

Therefore, parliaments, as a reflection of society, must be the driving force behind the elaboration of national action plans for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. They must contribute to such plans not only through ideas and political impetus, but also through parliamentary control of the executive which has to implement them.

Besides such specific plans, parliaments should take into account the intercultural and inter-religious dimension in their overall legislative work. National strategies in the most diverse fields - from social rights to urban planning, from education to employment - must be designed to make sure that all citizens and all communities are given equal opportunities and that these strategies do not lead to segregation or discrimination.

At the international level, the Parliamentary Assembly works very closely with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative. During the recent successful meeting of the Alliance in Rio de Janeiro, I was very pleased that the Council of Europe's contribution to this process was very much appreciated at UN level. Therefore, I consider that we should seize this opportunity and intensify our partnership with the Alliance of Civilisations.

By coincidence, Mr. Sampaio, the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilisations, was also the eminent guest of our Assembly last week in Strasbourg, where he contributed to the very lively discussion on the report on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe. Feelings run high when we deal with such sensitive matters, but I consider that the resolution which we adopted is balanced and objective.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I mentioned discrimination against national, ethnic and religious minorities, but I wish to underline that the Council of Europe has also had a leading role in combating gender-based discrimination and promoting equal opportunities. I might add in this context the pioneering role of the Assembly amongst international assemblies: under its rules of procedures, national delegations should include the under-represented sex at least in the same percentage as is present in their parliaments, and in any case one representative for each sex.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Banning discrimination is a very ambitious target, and one difficult to achieve, but when it comes to the rights of individuals, we have to be ambitious. We cannot settle for simple "tolerance". Tolerance is a positive concept, but it must not be our final goal. I rather see it as a starting point. What we really want to achieve is respect and mutual understanding. This apply to the rights of individuals, but it certainly has an impact to the relations between communities within a country and between states.

Therefore, to finish my speech, I should like to pay tribute to Kazakhstan for its efforts in the areas important for the Council of Europe, in particular strengthening intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and the participation of national minorities in the political and social life of the country. In this connection, I consider that the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan can serve as an example for other countries in this area.

Thank you for your attention.