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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Opening Session

Conference on the Christian-Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Dialogue

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Your Excellency, Mr Zsilot Semjen, Deputy Prime Minister
Your Excellency, Ms Kumari Selja, Minister of Culture of India
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

- It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to address this distinguished audience on the topical issue of religious diversity, in particular the Christian, Jewish and Muslim interfaith dialogue.
- Let me greet the Hungarian Presidency of the European Union for this timely initiative and for having placed diversity as a top priority of the 18-month strategic framework programme of the Spanish-Belgian-Hungarian so-called Presidency Trio.
- You know that the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations was created precisely to boost intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation at large in order to prepare the world's citizens to deal with diversity as an advantage and as a unique asset to meet the challenges of our globalizing world.
- But we all also know – too well and many times for all the wrong reasons – that “communicating across difference is not easy and the greater the cultural distance, the more difficult it gets”.
- This is why this kind of initiative is greatly needed.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- It is now well-known that because of a number of developments, cultural and religious diversity has acquired ever growing prominence in our lives and on political agendas.
- Among these factors we can identify some global trends such as: permanent migration flows which changed the population make up of most of the countries around the world; new means of communication and the related expansion of media content; an increase in controversies and debates on value systems and identity issues; a reported rise in incidents of discrimination, racism and populism; globalization and geopolitical changes in general; and world politics.
- Moreover, Samuel Huntington's prediction that after the end of the cold war we might witness an inter-cultural or inter-religious "clash of civilizations", which appears to have been confirmed by 9/11 and its tragic worldwide consequences, put cultural diversity issues in a broad sense high on the international agenda as a matter of urgency.

- But this is also a priority of domestic politics in many countries. European and Western democracies in general are facing a huge challenge in dealing with the increasing diversity of their societies, be it ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural.
- Our democracies are under mounting pressure because this diversity is generating growing anxiety among populations and driving communities apart.
- The success of many far-right, anti-immigration parties in most of the recent elections in European countries is a clear sign of a growing malaise that has to be addressed because it shows an increased sense of insecurity and a profound unease.
- Whether it is based on fears and prejudices that are explored for political reasons or on a real inability to cope with growing diversity has to be clarified. But we cannot afford to deny that cultural and religious diversity has become an issue that challenges democratic societies.
- Let's focus on European countries. For us the question is: how do we best ensure that secularism continues to be the safest basis to preserve the core of democratic principles and values? How do we revamp pluralism?

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- Pluralistic societies should enable good communication between the systems of beliefs that all religions are. However, this communication is what is failing in our present times.
- Pluralism, namely religious pluralism, is what has to be reinforced within our democracies if we want to build inclusive societies, if we want to reinforce social cohesion, if we want to live together in peace and in mutual respect.
- To confront polarization and extremism in societies we need new strategies to manage and promote inter-faith dialogue.
- Interfaith dialogue should be promoted at large. Open communication facilitates mutual understanding and when words are translated into collaborative action we can achieve greater shared security, our common goal.
- Let me stress that to prevent polarization, confrontation, conflict and intolerance and to develop a culture of peace, understanding, tolerance and respect, we need universal values grounded in the common humanity shared by every man, woman and child on earth, regardless of linguistic, racial, religious or other differences.

- In my view, this is why the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has a decisive role to play because it is clearly based on the recognition of a common humanity and provides a minimum solution to deal with its miseries.
- But religions and religious leaders are also of the utmost importance in this regard not only because “religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men and in the way they live and treat other persons” – as outlined in the Declaration issued by the “World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance”, but also because “religion, spirituality and belief may and can contribute to the promotion of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and to the eradication of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance” (Durban Declaration).

Excellencies,

- All our countries face the challenge of good governance of cultural diversity. This is not only about integrating migrants or minorities. This is all about preparing the hearts and minds of all individuals and peoples for the fact that globalization forces us to live in one world where we are permanently confronted with identity dilemmas and diversity issues.

- Moreover, at global level, our world is splitting apart along historic fault lines of culture and religion.
- So, good governance of cultural diversity is a topical issue not only to enhance social cohesion within our societies, foster a culture of peace, prevent conflicts and contribute to peace-building in post-conflict situations, but also to preserve cultural diversity as the fourth pillar of sustainable development.
- This is all about education, about learning how to live together in our globalizing world, where clashes anywhere are clashes everywhere and where cultural and religious fault-lines divide our societies.
- The Alliance of Civilizations makes full sense precisely in this framework as a new UN soft power tool to make diplomacy and address these new “glocal” challenges for security and peace.
- So we are available to work with countries, governments, local powers, civil society, led-faith organizations to help build a better world.
- I wish you good work.
- Many thanks