

**Statement of Mr Šarūnas Birutis, Minister of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, at the 38th
session of the General Conference of UNESCO**
Paris, November 4, 2015

Mister President of the General Conference,
Madam Director General,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to represent Lithuania at this General Conference, when we celebrate the 70th anniversary of UNESCO. For decades, this Organization has defended an inclusive vision for humanity, safeguarded a place for culture, education and science within a wider political agenda.

This year we celebrate yet another UNESCO's achievement: the role of culture, education, human rights, and women empowerment was clearly highlighted in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

Today, though, we face tough realities: millions of people are displaced, entire countries and regions – destabilized, social and political systems – shaken in an unprecedented manner. These are the consequences of human rights and the rule of law being violated, violence being escalated on religious grounds, cultural heritage targeted as a symbol of 'otherness'.

It is a matter for all of us, and it is also a cultural matter. UNESCO has done a great deal of work in promoting the right to enjoy one's culture as a fundamental right.

Culture is not just a civilized embellishment of life, it binds societies and helps to overcome divisions, it develops solidarity, empathy and innovation. It is the lifeblood of communities, no less important than health or wealth. And if maintained and developed with care, it may become a real resource for the well-being of individuals.

The role of culture in Lithuania has been constantly strengthened. We recognise the cultural sector as standing at the crossroad of social advancement and innovation, as well as empowering citizens, and we actively share our experience also beyond the national borders.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The digital age changes the media landscape. Together with our partners, including UNESCO, we are constantly looking for ways to renew our commitment in promoting the freedom of speech, freedom of

access and a multi-stakeholder approach to the internet. Recently, Lithuania has become an official member of the Freedom Online Coalition.

We welcome UNESCO's active engagement in the field of freedom of speech and safety of journalists. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Lithuania has been strongly committed to promoting international norms regarding the safety of journalists and impunity. I am proud to consider my country and UNESCO as natural partners in this field.

Another area of such a natural partnership is the promotion of women rights. Lithuania has consistently pursued national policies aimed to increase women's representation. Two of the country's highest posts – that of the President and the Speaker of the Parliament – are currently held by women. We have systematically reinforced the gender perspective in our foreign policy.

Distinguished guests,

Today UNESCO's mission remains as relevant as it was yesterday. In some cases, it is even more relevant than before. Inspired by its mission and reinforced by its experience, our Organization is unchallenged to tackle the threat of youth radicalization to violent extremism, notably through education. We especially commend the adoption of the Framework for Action, which will guide the Education 2030 agenda.

Lithuania sees a significant role of UNESCO in yet another regard. We express our deep concern about the situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol in Ukraine, where human rights are being violated by the *de facto* authorities. Where dissenting voices, including those of Crimean Tatars, are being silenced.

My country strongly supports all international efforts to monitor and report on these challenges in Ukraine. We would welcome a more active involvement of UNESCO in Crimea and trust the Organization will step up its efforts to provide information on the developments in the region.

[Lithuania stands ready to support UNESCO in this and every other future endeavour.]

I thank you for your attention.