

Mr. President,  
Madam Director General,  
Excellences,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Seventy years since the establishment of UNESCO and only a year before the celebration of the 2,400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Aristotle, Greece is looking forward to participating in the next Executive Board of the Organization. After taking stock of past and current achievements, let me outline our vision and perspectives for UNESCO in the 'new age of limits' humanity is already experiencing.

Global climate change, natural disasters, economic upheavals, rising tensions within nationalism and extremism, famine, inequality, illiteracy and xenophobia, together, with the current cultural and humanitarian plague in Iraq and Syria, are testing the resilience of the existing international system. In this changing global environment, we are compelled to further strengthen the important role of UNESCO on the global stage.

In particular, the ongoing refugee crisis represents a major challenge that affects the entire international community. Greece considers the protection of refugees and human life in general, a fundamental element of our civilization and our common system of values.

The Greek people have welcomed refugees and have shown their solidarity in many ways. We are determined to continue treating the hundreds of thousands of refugees in the most humane way.

We believe that the only way to tackle the refugee crisis is to address its root causes, wars and conflicts, and promote sustainable growth and development. We must step up our efforts for resolving conflicts in Syria and Iraq, as well as for tackling religious and cultural extremism. To this end, Greece took the initiative to organize and host, last October, an International Conference on "Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East".

UNESCO can rise as an even more prominent player in defusing international crises, addressing global challenges and promoting a balanced and sustainable development. In our view, UNESCO retains a comparative advantage in relation to other international actors, since it allocates substantial resources for the purpose of enhancing education, sciences and culture.

Mr. President,

Over the past decade, the increase in deliberate attacks on cultural heritage has been associated with a strategy of extremists to use the destruction of culture as a weapon of war and as means to rewrite history by erasing thousands of years of ancient civilizations.

This strategy is associated with the use of new technologies and communication tools in order to spread hatred, far beyond the borders of existing battlefields. The persecution of individuals on cultural or religious grounds combined with the deliberate destruction of their heritage can be described as “cultural cleansing”. Security Council Resolution 2199/2015 represents, undoubtedly, a landmark in the recognition of the direct link between the destruction and pillage of cultural heritage, particularly by ISIS, and the financing of terrorism.

Greece is holding the Chairmanship of UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which is the monitoring body of the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954. Within this context, and following the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2199, the Committee, acting in cooperation with the Director-General of UNESCO, issued three consecutive Statements which condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq.

Furthermore, Greece is holding the Chairmanship of the Subsidiary Committee of the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. The Operation Guidelines of this Committee, for which we worked so hard, established new standards for the preservation of cultural heritage: a certificate for every cultural object and the obligation for whoever owns cultural property to prove that he owns it legally. Last May, during the General Assembly of the aforementioned Convention, 130 States adopted the Declaration to STOP ILLICIT TRAFFICKING under the initiative of Greece.

Cultural heritage, be it tangible or intangible, forms the backbone of cultural diversity which, in turn, feeds intercultural dialogue. Once again, we commend UNESCO for its laudable efforts to permanently safeguard world cultural heritage. I note, in particular, the ‘Memory of the World’ Committee’s recent decision to inscribe the ‘Derveni Papyrus’, the oldest book in Europe, on UNESCO’s International Register. Furthermore, promoting connections of monuments or sites to be registered with real educational, research, entrepreneurial or recreational needs of local populations, could be a strategic way ahead.

Governments have grown increasingly aware of the fact that economic growth and trade relations are not enough by themselves to enhance peace and stability and that intellectual exchange between societies of different cultural traditions raises awareness of the moral dimension of politics.

We consider UNESCO’s policies on intercultural dialogue to be a key instrument in spreading full respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The “2010, *UN International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures*” has given us the opportunity to clearly point out our belief that no appeal to any ‘cultural specificity’ can give excuse to the violation of these fundamental values. The complete respect for cultural diversity is paramount.

Professing these principles, UNESCO, as a specialized international organization, should indeed be assigned the role of strategic supervision of the 'dialogue of civilizations' worldwide.

Thank you for your attention.