

**Statement by H.E. Mr Gent ÇAKAJ,
Acting Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania
At the Plenary Debate of the 40th Session of the General Conference of
UNESCO
Paris, 15 November 2019**

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is great honour to take part in the 40th session of UNESCO's General Conference.

To begin with, I would like to emphasize that Albania, as a strong promoter of multilateralism in general, remains a robust supporter of this organization too.

For decades, we have played an active role and worked together with friends, partners and like-minded countries to uphold our shared values worldwide.

A stronger UNESCO means better education, larger protection of human rights and freedoms and greater cross-cultural dialogue and tolerance in general.

For this reason, we do also strongly support the process of strategic transformation that UNESCO is undergoing.

This is crucial in making the organization more visible, efficient and stronger.

On this basis, we do also appreciate the consensus that was reached on budget as a crucial step to provide this organization with the proper means to carry out its mandate.

Unfortunately, the principle of multilateralism is often being put at question exactly at the time when it is the most needed. This is just wrong and this trend must be reversed.

A number of concerning issues that we face today – ranging from climate change up to increasing social inequalities and gross violation of human rights – cannot be properly tackled without international cooperation.

It is with this conviction that Albania is preparing to take over the OSCE Chairmanship next year. We stand ready to work closely with UNESCO with the aim to protect human rights, promote mutual understanding and support education as a mean to eradicate all sources of inspiring social exclusion and extremism.

There is wide range of issues that I could discuss today. Given time restrictions, however, I will solely focus on three main issues which are at the core of our action in UNESCO.

First, we all agree – I hope – that we won't be successful in building a culture of peace and mutual understanding, without prior investment in education, This is a task and value this organization stands for. In this regard I stress out that Albania is investing in education to insight peace and foster tolerance. We are implementing tailored-made projects in order to promote teaching on religions based on values of diversity and inclusion. We take great pride in the fact that religious coexistence and plurality in Albania is internal part of the very fabric of the society, it is a lived experience.

In addition to this, the Albanian government is undertaking all necessary measures to increase of education for all and free of charge. Albania will continue to closely working with UNESCO in order to promote to maintain the value of education in promoting social well-understanding.

Second,

Albania is located in a region that was not only subjugated to communist dictatorship but also underwent terrible conflicts and wars. We are working hard to help the entire region overcome this painful legacy and built up a different and a better future for all.

We are firmly convinced that cross-cultural communication is essential to reconciliation just as we do believe that different historic worldviews are enriching to our social lives.

In July this year, the World Heritage Committee has inscribed the Albanian part of the Lake Ohrid Region in the World Heritage List. This decision is more than a contribution to protecting such a rich and unique trans boundary area.

In reality, it represents another tangible example in cross border cooperation between two neighbouring countries, Albania and North Macedonia. This is an example, on how cultural and natural heritage can bring countries together, and not just torn nations apart.

In this spirit, Albania has substantially strengthened the legal framework for protecting the minority rights.

Yet, in order to have social diversity, we must build open societies that guarantee freedom of speech and expression too. As an organization, we have no alternative but to put our most systematic and substantial efforts in supporting free and independent press.

Albania will continue working with UNESCO in order to build societies in which plurality of worldviews is not just allowed but appreciated.

Third, Inclusiveness and universality are core values of UNESCO. Consequently, we cannot ignore independent countries with tremendous potential for this organization as a whole. Unfortunately, there is still one country in Europe that remains excluded: Europe's youngest Republic, The Republic of Kosovo.

As we all know, the Republic of Kosovo has applied to join UNESCO in 2015, but very regrettably, faced Serbia's intentional misleading campaign and the opposition of some other Member States. Rejecting Kosovo's application was historic mistake – for our meeting would have been richer and better if the Republic of Kosovo would have been with us present today.

For what I can claim beyond any doubt, the Republic of Kosovo is regional leader in protecting minority rights, and cultural heritage of all minorities based on the most distinguished and advanced international standards. This is not just our opinion; it is well-documented fact.

We have heard several times a number of concerns regarding the preservation of cultural heritage in the Republic of Kosovo.

Just two days ago, from this very place, Mr. Alexander Vucic, the President of a direct neighboring country to the Republic of Kosovo, repeated similar misleading propaganda.

It is unfortunate but hardly a surprise. It is quite clear, that any such claim would have been better dealt with, if Kosovo were Member of this organization. This is just so obvious.

So, once more, We call on Member States of UNESCO to have an inclusive approach and support Kosovo's membership path in our joint family, a reality that can simply be delayed but not avoided.

From our part, we will spare no efforts to accomplish this task – Not just because we politically recognize and unconditionally support the Republic of Kosovo, but because we are supporting education and science, culture and communication, tradition and history, for all freedoms in general.

Mr. President,

since we are on the eve of the International Day of Tolerance, let me conclude by highlighting something that we must not forget: tolerance and mutual understanding are essential in making the world a better place to live. This principle stands at the very foundations UNESCO: it is a principle worth working hard for.

This is why, I would not say it enough; the exclusion of the Republic of Kosovo goes against such immensely valuable purpose.

Thank you.