

Mr. President, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first thank the Russian Federation for the excellent way they are hosting the 137th IPU in the beautiful city of St. Petersburg.

In the city that was founded by Czar Peter the Great in 1703, I think it is appropriate that on the subject of this General Debate, namely "Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue", I should start my contribution by highlighting the personality, the drive and the historic importance of Czar Peter the Great.

Peter the Great, the mighty Czar in more than one sense - he was for instance over two meters tall - had a great personal interest in foreign countries and foreign cultures. With this interest he dwarfed, not only through his length, many of his contemporaries.

Peter the Great was set on modernising the Russian Empire. To this end he travelled several times abroad to experience and learn from the latest developments in other countries. Among the countries he travelled to, Peter the Great visited incognito the Republic of the United Netherlands in 1697 and 1698. He worked undercover as a carpenter at shipyards and learned about seaworthy vessels. With the knowledge he acquired he later had his own navy built.

Peter the Great was inspired by the City of Amsterdam, one of the wealthiest cities in Europe at the time. The city of Amsterdam with its intricate canal system became an important source of inspiration for the construction of the city of St. Petersburg.

Why was Amsterdam, why was the Dutch Republic so wealthy, creative, innovative in the 17th century, the age which we call in the Netherlands our "Golden Age", and why was it so relatively peaceful?

The answer to this question connects history to the subject of the General Debate of today.

The Europe of the 16th century can be characterized by heavy religious disputes. Reformist movements stood up against the Catholic church and denounced the corruption and perversion that had infiltrated the old Church. On the 31st of October 1517 (this month 500 years ago) Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, thus launching the reformation. Catholic monarchs, more often than not, suppressed the new religions. On the other hand, different reformists did not always agree among themselves either. There was a lot of conflict and hatred over religion over the time.

Contrary to all the religious controversy and struggle, the young Republic of the Netherlands wanted to be a safe haven for all for people with different faiths and different backgrounds.

The country, with its tolerant spirit, attracted religious refugees from other countries, notably Jewish merchants from Portugal who brought much wealth with them, French Protestants, many of whom were shopkeepers, tradesmen or scientists, Catholics from Antwerp who often were masters in literature, printing, crafts and paintings. In this atmosphere of religious and cultural freedom sciences, arts, new crafts and trade flourished, while at the same time no interior conflicts harassed the country.

One might be so bold as to say that because of inter-faith tolerance and dialogue, in those days, the Republic could flourish peacefully.

So much for history. But what I drew your attention to, demonstrates that when different cultures and religions meet and interact in a peaceful way, on the basis of respect for and understanding of one another, new horizons can be reached and great achievements can be accomplished and ultimately, a peaceful society and, one might hope, a peaceful world.

In our days the world has become a smaller place. Through technological means like Twitter, Facebook and youtube, we can all get in touch with innumerable people on the planet, if we want to. We can launch messages on all possible subjects, make statements on everything that excites us, but also on everything that annoys us.

Many people enjoy the freedom of electronic communication. But we must admit that the tools of communication not always make the discussions very precise and nuanced. Hate speech can easily be initiated and facts can easily be made up or twisted. False images can create enemies. Radicalisation and fundamentalism can be fed by constantly enlarging small differences.

So there is a drawback to our new ways of communication. One should always realize that social media is just a means to communicate but at the same time, it can be a hindrance for true dialogue.

Dialogue is essential for mutual understanding. Through dialogue, one can 'give and take' in an exchange of opinions, whether the discussion is about faith, ethnic background or any other subject.

We should realize that the problems and differences easily get out of hand by misinformation and foremost by lack of dialogue, lack of direct communication.

We as politicians are in a special and responsible position to always enter into direct communication and to promote dialogue at all levels. Through dialogue and personal contact, we can build trust. And trust is the keyword to cultural pluralism and a peaceful world.

Especially trust in upholding human rights and the essential conditions for democracy like freedom of speech, freedom to voice opposing opinions without fear of being arrested and the freedom of a free press etc.

As an international community together we developed the human rights which are enshrined in international treaties and declarations. At this 137th IPU conference, the standing committee on democracy and human rights presents a draft resolution, entitled "Sharing our diversity: The 20th anniversary of the IPU Declaration on Democracy". The resolution was a co-production of parliamentarians from India, the Russian Federation and the Netherlands.

I fully endorse this resolution and I hope it will contribute to fully acknowledging the freedom of religion, cultural diversity and ethnic identity, while upholding democracy and human rights.

Let me end by thanking the current president of the IPU, Mr. Chowdhury, for the exceptional way he presided over IPU during his mandate.

Thank you.