

**Address by Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina H.E. Mr. Bakir
Izetbegović at UNESCO Leader's Forum, Paris, October 31, 2017**

Madam President,

Madam Director-General,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

It is a great honor and pleasure to be here with you today.

At the outset, I want to commend Director-General Bokova for her inspiring leadership over the past eight years. Her commitment to UNESCO's ideals and values with her tireless efforts to carry out its mission deserve the highest praise. Despite facing many challenges, this Organization has managed, under her leadership, to reaffirm its role and importance in the multilateral system of the United Nations.

I would like to congratulate Ms. Audrey Azoulay of France for her nomination by the Executive Board as the new Director-General. We look forward to working with her to further advance our cooperation with UNESCO and to safeguard the impartiality, credibility and unique mandate of this Organization.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is deeply committed to UNESCO's mission and will remain actively engaged in its programs and activities.

Our partnership has grown strong over the past 25 years since we joined this Organization. UNESCO has been a true friend and partner to the government and citizens of my country in preserving and promoting our cultural, ethnic and religious diversity and helping us restore our cultural heritage that was so severely affected by the war.

One of the annexes to the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war, was specifically dedicated to the establishment of an independent Commission to Preserve National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was the first time in modern history that preservation of cultural heritage was integrated into an international peace agreement. UNESCO was tasked to implement this important mission, which laid the foundations of our partnership.

Over the past 25 years UNESCO has actively supported Bosnia and Herzegovina in every segment of its mandate, helping my country overcome a traumatic war experience whose impact is still present in many segments of our society.

UNESCO's work in Bosnia and Herzegovina is no less valuable today, and its continuing support remains of great significance to us. As its mandate is firmly enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue to work closely with UNESCO to promote education, culture, science and communication as drivers of sustainable peace and development.

Sustaining peace and development was, in fact, our main objective when in 2014 the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina launched, together with then-Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon, an initiative called “Dialogue for the Future”, aimed at promoting coexistence and diversity in my country. This first-of-its-kind project within the United Nations system was designed to create spaces for dialogue, to promote trust building and appreciation of diversity; to increase participation, awareness and the influence of youth in policy debates on issues impacting our country’s development; to promote the role of education as a driver of greater social cohesion; and to emphasize the role of culture for citizens and communities to advance common peacebuilding and development goals.

The Presidency and the United Nations Team in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO, successfully implemented the first phase of this project from 2014 to 2016; and we are now working to implement its second phase, scaling it up in our region to involve Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. We are proud of this initiative because it was built on our desire to promote unity in diversity as a platform for sustaining peace and building a prosperous future for our country and our region, in line with the principles and goals enshrined in the 2030 Agenda.

In the same spirit, we are devoted to safeguarding Bosnia and Herzegovina’s rich and diverse cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, while respecting cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism that has characterized and shaped our society and identity for centuries. No matter the complex challenges we face, we remain committed to advancing intercultural and interreligious dialogue, tolerance and harmony as pillars of our state and society.

Many of you remember the sad moment on 9 November 1993 when the Old Bridge in Mostar was destroyed. But I am sure you also remember the moment on 23 July 2004 when we jointly celebrated the inauguration of the reconstructed Old Bridge. That moment was a milestone in our recent history – a testimony to the resilience of human spirit and the power of culture to rebuild bridges that connect peoples and communities. The reconstruction of the Old Bridge was a result of the international efforts led by the World Bank and UNESCO, coordinated by Bosnia and Herzegovina, and supported by Italy, Turkey, Croatia, the Netherlands and many other international partners.

The rebuilding of the Old Bridge initiated a process of fruitful regional cooperation in preserving cultural heritage. An excellent example of that regional cooperation was the joint initiative by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro, developed under the umbrella of UNESCO, to inscribe the medieval tombstone graveyards – called *Stećci* – on the World Heritage List. This serial property that combines 28 component sites including 4,000 medieval tombstones located in four neighboring states was inscribed on the World Heritage List on July 15, 2016. These tombstones are especially remarkable for their inter-faith character, as they were used for burial by three medieval religious communities – the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and the Church of Bosnia. Bosnia and Herzegovina is proud to have coordinated this regional initiative that affirms the importance of culture as a platform for promoting reconciliation, cooperation and development.

The two most recent nominations from Bosnia and Herzegovina to UNESCO’s Memory of the World Program – the Sarajevo *Haggadah* and the manuscript collection of the *Gazi Husrev-Bey* Library in Sarajevo – are another great example of our contribution to the preservation of cultural diversity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bosnia and Herzegovina has decided to bid for membership on the World Heritage Committee at the forthcoming elections to be held here in Paris on 14 November.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to all the countries that have supported our candidacy.

We believe that our commitment to safeguarding and restoring the cultural heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as our experience and expertise in preserving and managing diversity, make Bosnia and Herzegovina a credible and committed candidate for membership on the World Heritage Committee.

Our main objective as a member of this body would be to protect and enhance the credibility of the World Heritage Convention as the most important global instrument for transmitting cultural heritage to future generations as a shared resource of our humanity.

The human race is a mosaic composed of a rich variety of peoples, cultures and religions. Our responsibility is to protect and nurture that mosaic. The historical experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina offers valuable lessons in finding a model for harmonious coexistence and thriving of such diversity.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's unique multi-ethnic and multi-religious culture has been woven through one thousand years of tolerance and respect among its citizens, regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation. For hundreds of years the citizens of my country have lived in harmony, helping each other to build houses of worship that almost physically lean on one another.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a meeting point of civilizations and a bridge between the East and the West. It is the westernmost reach of Orthodox Christianity and Islam in Europe, one of the easternmost reaches of Catholicism, and for almost half a millennium home to a small but thriving Jewish community that has been an integral part of our society.

Ethnic or religious exclusiveness and extremism are absolutely unacceptable from our point of view, because they are contrary to the values we have nurtured for centuries. Throughout our history the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have paid a high price for protecting their pluralistic community and identity, for defending the idea of cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism and diversity in our society.

But, no matter the price, we have never given up on these founding principles of our state and society. We have always understood that the preservation and success of our pluralistic culture, as a specific microcosm, is important for the whole world.

Today a battle is ongoing in our world between those who seek to protect and enhance the pluralistic character and tolerant spirit of their countries and societies, and those who are causing and deepening cultural, ethnic and religious divides and conflicts. We must not allow the idea of cultural pluralism to be defeated. Its defeat would produce dangerous ruptures at our world's most delicate fault lines.

The dark and dangerous ideologies of isolation, disintegration and exclusiveness must not be allowed to prevail over the progressive ideologies of inclusion, integration and pluralism that seek to liberate human potential.

Those of us who believe that cultural pluralism is one of humankind's most precious treasures must press on with our efforts to bridge cultural, ethnic and religious divides and build a pluralistic, inclusive and tolerant international society in which diversity is a source of our common prosperity, a driver of cooperation instead of conflict, and a bridge instead of a wall between countries and peoples.

Our world is embroiled in conflicts that are fomented by cultural, ethnic and religious divides and geopolitical competition for control of territories and access to resources. At the root of many of these conflicts are discrimination and marginalization, failures of governance, impunity, deep-rooted poverty and lack of opportunities, all aggravated by the growing effects of climate change.

Political, economic and social injustice and inequality contribute to the rise of despair and hopelessness, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of extremism, intolerance and violence. Lack of education, ignorance, refusal to engage in dialogue, to understand, embrace and bridge cultural, ethnic and religious differences give rise to prejudice, xenophobia and hatred in our societies and communities.

We cannot keep the impact of these modern conflicts and discontents outside our state borders, nor can we ignore their global consequences in our increasingly interconnected world. Our approach to tackling these challenges must be holistic, coordinated and unified. Culture, science, education and communication are the pillars of such a comprehensive approach to addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of extremism, radicalization, intolerance and xenophobia in our societies.

In particular, we must work harder to expand access to quality education and opportunities for our young generations. Young people offer immense potential for our world. If well-educated and gainfully employed, they will be a major generator of stability and prosperity. If uneducated, jobless, robbed of dignity and living in poverty and despair, they can easily succumb to extremism and violence, and thus become generators of instability. Sustained and systematic investment in quality education is one of the best ways to create and expand opportunities for young generations.

UNESCO has a critical role to play in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. Quality education must not be a privilege of some, but a right for everyone, accessible with equity and inclusiveness.

The lagging of undeveloped and underdeveloped countries behind the developed world is directly linked to their lagging in access to education, research and innovation, especially in the fields of science and technology. That is why our first and foremost objective must be to gradually reduce and ultimately close the educational, scientific and technological gaps in our world. We must ensure that each society, each citizen and each child in the world – no matter who or where they are – fully and equally benefit from the scientific and technological advances our civilization achieves. UNESCO plays a crucial role in this regard – by working to create inclusive knowledge societies and by promoting sharing of and access to knowledge and information, especially to scientific and technological research and innovation.

To sustain peace and achieve prosperity for all, we must put the most pressing needs of our citizens – human development and human rights – at the center of our actions. Human dignity, freedom and equality are the most powerful drivers of peace and development. There can be no lasting peace and security when injustice and inequality are an everyday experience for millions of people, when basic rights are denied to so many human beings, when so many men, women and children around the world live in fear and insecurity. The resulting grievances make our states unstable and our societies vulnerable. Injustice and inequality diminish the human potential of our communities, leaving development and prosperity beyond their reach. Thus, the road of progress must go from ending poverty to reducing inequality to building just, tolerant, open and inclusive societies.

One of our most important missions in the time to come will be to build bridges between cultures, religions, and civilizations; bridges of dialogue and understanding, of trust and respect; bridges to reach solutions to problems, the true nature of which we have only begun to understand.

We all celebrate the rebuilding of the Old Bridge in Mostar. But it could not have been rebuilt without the assistance of the international community, based on their understanding of the cultural significance of the Old Bridge. Bosnia and Herzegovina did not recover alone – and even as it was always aware of the difficulties that a temporary but necessary dependence brought – it learned to turn that outside help to the advantage of its citizens as a whole.

Today, many other countries in our world need help in building or rebuilding bridges in their societies. Bosnia and Herzegovina – the home of great bridges and bridge-builders between peoples, cultures and religions – stands ready to help in these building and rebuilding challenges of the twenty-first century. UNESCO's role in this regard is more important today than ever before, because this Organization has always been the best framework for building bridges of international cooperation in education, science, culture and communication. Let us keep it so.

Thank you.