



**Remarks by H.E. Mr. Aldo Bumçi,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania,
as delivered at the Opening Plenary Session of the High Level Conference on
Tolerance and Non-Discrimination
Tirana, 21 May 2013**

Thank you Mr. Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to echo the words of the Prime Minister Berisha and warmly welcome you all in Tirana for the OSCE High Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination (TND). I wish you all a very pleasant stay and in our capital and invite each of you to enjoy every bit of the traditional Albanian hospitality.

We are satisfied that by convening this conference the OSCE community recognized the need to pursue the path of high-level events charted by our predecessors over the past 10 years and to continue its substantial engagement in the TND field.

And therefore, here we are, in this well-established OSCE platform, to reaffirm our commitment to the noble goals of tolerance and non-discrimination, to share our experience in this domain and to make our national positions heard on all possible issues encompassed therein.

As you might be aware of, these events are not new to Albania. Under the guiding motto "United in Diversity", Albania successfully chaired the Council of Europe during second half of last year. The end of this presidency was marked by the organization of a high level conference entitled "United in diversity - strength for Europe" in November 2012. During the conference, we debated issues of promoting intercultural dialogue, the education of new generations and how to live together. Today's event is dedicated to fostering peace, stability and upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms, enshrined in milestone OSCE documents from the Helsinki Final act, to the Copenhagen document and beyond.

Albania is a country that takes pride of its century-long traditions of religious harmony and tolerance. These constitute the foundations of the Albanian model of coexistence in diversity: a model best epitomized by the events of the Second World War in Albania, when hundreds of Albanian families, regardless of their religious belief, sheltered and protected thousands of Jews who faced annihilation. This is a story of human courage and sacrifice, which speaks loudly of how a small nation with a great heart can make a difference in difficult times.

Therefore dialogue among civilizations and cultures as well as the advocacy of inter-confessional concord are part and parcel of our foreign policy. Equally, the preservation of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment in the Western Balkans is a matter of priority of our regional policy and constitutes our national contribution to further advance regional peace and stability and harmony.

At home, we have overhauled and updated our national legislation, which now includes a comprehensive anti-discrimination law and an amended criminal code. These stipulate

measures tailored to combat all forms of intolerance and discrimination, including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This is how it should be, because human rights and fundamental freedoms apply to all individuals without distinction.

Excellencies,

The global economic crisis has clearly heightened tensions that threaten the cohesion and the stability of the OSCE region. It has imposed stress and economic hardships on large numbers of citizens, thus bolstering support for extremist movements, whose rhetoric regularly plays with racist and xenophobic themes and targets vulnerable or marginalized groups. The OSCE participating States must respond to these challenges by honouring their TND commitments in a determined and perseverant fashion.

We are also convinced that the OSCE is well placed to assist Europe to meet the challenges faced by increasingly diverse and pluralistic societies. The OSCE has adopted an impressive body of commitments in this area that are unequalled; it also has accumulated a wealth of expertise and knowledge in its institutions, primarily the ODIHR, and field operations.

All of this demonstrates a serious OSCE commitment which is internationally recognized, and there are tangible examples of success. But we know full well that these challenges are still with us, and in a climate of economic stress they may yet become more acute. Regrettably over the past 4 years the OSCE participating States have not been able to reaffirm their commitments in the TND field. It is high time reverse this course of inaction.

Finally, let me say a few words about the focus of this conference, education of young people. We have a responsibility to guarantee the younger generations a common future in a world of peace where human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected and where diversity is valued. This means that education is not the sole responsibility of educators, but is the duty of all of those who are role models for the younger generation: parents, politicians, religious and community leaders, athletes, etc. There is too much prejudice and stereotypes that lead to discriminatory behaviour and violence.

We need to invest the necessary efforts to eradicate the root causes of intolerance and discrimination and promote respect for diversity and acceptance. As Mohandas Gandhi once put it, "Mutual Toleration is the golden rule of conduct, since we will never all think alike and we shall see truth in fragment and from different angles of vision". To this golden rule, I would add observance for the fundamental principle that all individuals are born equal in rights and dignity and are equal before the law.

I therefore hope that this conference will give us all a sense of the renewed commitment to these burning issues and will be a source of inspiration for action.

Let me conclude by expressing my full confidence that this will be a productive and fruitful Conference. This has been the case with all other high-level events that have preceded the Tirana Conference in the past 10 years, from which the OSCE community has gathered considerable experience to follow up and build upon.

I thank you very much.