

Speech by Dr. Danilo Türk, former President of the Republic of Slovenia

The opening of the 2nd FESTIVAL OF TOLERANCE IN LJUBLJANA, Slovenia, 17 January 2016

Ladies and Gentlemen,

we are gathered here, once again, in the Jewish Cultural Centre in Mini teater in Ljubljana, at an event carrying an important message, a message of tolerance.

We have come together on the initiative and under the auspices of the Jewish Cultural Centre, which makes today's ceremony even more significant and meaningful. It is the Jewish people who have experienced and endured for the longest time in history, during many centuries, various kinds of persecution and intolerance. In a few days from now, on 27 January, we will commemorate victims of the Holocaust, the biggest crime perpetrated against any people in human history. And once again we shall repeat - never ever again ...

At the same time and continually, we know of too well that tolerance and prevention of mass crimes must be strived for on a regular basis and every single day. Striving for tolerance is a task that shall never be rendered irrelevant. Intolerance of people who are different and other is an inveterate social phenomenon. Intolerance has many forms, and it is constantly forced upon us as the first and emotional response to many a problem in contemporary world or even as a shortcut to real solutions. Indeed, there is nothing easier than blaming others for one's problems and failures.

Naturally, in the course of time it invariably transpires that intolerance is a wrong way, as it deteriorates the problem and ignores the fact that intolerant people are actually part of the problem. However, it is all too often that this recognition is attained too late – only after damage has already been done. Strengthening of tolerance must be timely. Renouncing intolerance must be overwhelming. This requires our sound deliberation, a wise judgment, and, in many cases, some courage as well.

Is it ever right to be tolerant of the intolerant? There is no single answer to this essential ethical question. One has to know and understand the nature and the origin of various phenomena of intolerance, their social and political dimensions as well as their criminal manifestations. The latter must be prosecuted. However, one has to bear in mind that criminal prosecution addresses only one part of the problem, and often it is its minor part. There are many more tasks to be done in the area of education, culture and especially in mass media. Recently, mass media have increasingly become the hub of intolerance, incitement and hate speech. On many occasions, especially on internet forums and message boards, these forms of intolerance have often prevailed.

Slovenia is no exception. In our fairly peaceful and until recently a relatively tolerant country we are being faced with alarming manifestations of intolerance. Not a long time ago we witnessed the burning of a book. Xenophobia, spreading the fear of refugees and islamophobia are on the increase. It is laudable that the Jewish Cultural Centre was one of the first institutions to publicly condemn a recent desecration of the Islamic Centre building site in Ljubljana. It is laudable that the condemnation of this act was conveyed by the Justice and Peace Commission on behalf of the

Catholic community. Quite rightly the condemnation of this appalling and intolerant act was voiced by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia. It is not laudable, however, that many political players in our country have remained silent on this issue. They should know that in cases such as this, it is silence that fuels intolerance.

It is indeed passivity and politics of silence that feeds intolerance!

At this point in time, there is hardly a more topical issue in Europe as the debate on how to stop the proliferation of intolerance. Mass migrations and flows of refugees have become significant catalysts of such phenomena. This calls for a profound reflection and an adequate policy and it will not be an easy task.

Immigration has always instigated strong emotional reactions and incited anxiety and the feeling of endangerment. Psychological aspects are more essential than the demographic or economic ones. It is a psychologically founded fear of the other and the different that breeds conditions for intolerance. The above should be borne in mind by people who migrate as well as by political leaders of those countries where the migrants are headed. Unfortunately, it is both parties that have failed to understand this psychological problem.

Every migrant should be made familiar of the wise words of the former Reis ul Ulema from Sarajevo, Mustafa Cerić, who delivered the following message to the refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war two decades ago:

"Every refugee and every immigrant should observe the following three basic imperatives:

- Respect the laws of the country that accepted you;
- Learn the language of the country in which you live, and
- Do a good deed every day for your new neighbours."

It is these views that express a truly profound wisdom that everybody should bear in mind, including the political leaders in the countries of immigration. They should make every effort to incorporate it in their political strategies. The so-called political correctness which advises avoidance of unpleasant issues is not a good guideline for policy making. Formalist reliance on legal rules that were laid out for phenomena of migration on a much lesser scale is not a right way to go. Reducing problems to security-related and humanitarian dimension does not allow the creation of an effective political and practical approach to real problems.

So, what is the link between the needs of our time and our striving for tolerance?

Renouncing intolerance is not sufficient in itself in our efforts to deal with the problems brought about by our time. However, it is the very renouncing of intolerance that allows us to embark on shaping appropriate policies and public opinion. Renouncing intolerance is a necessary condition for problem solving. But to put this in practice depends on people as individuals.

Renouncing intolerance is a matter of personal attitude and one's elementary ethical choice. That is why it is so urgent that we publicly condemn every single occurrence of intolerance. It is of the utmost importance to remind ourselves time and time again where intolerance has led humanity in the past, and how many victims it has caused.

Furthermore, it is equally important to remember that mighty oaks from little acorns grow, and that is precisely petty, everyday occurrences of intolerance that can cause future tragedies. Since intolerance is such a serious threat, it is of vital importance to have events such as the Festival of Tolerance.

In the coming days, we are invited to attend a number of film screenings and interesting talks on the enduring issues of tolerance and intolerance, as well as on topical issues of our time. We have busy days ahead of us, days of urgent and meaningful activity.

I wish to extend my gratitude for this project to its authors: the Jewish Cultural Centre, Mini teater, and above all to Mr. Robert Walth, Mr. Ivica Buljan and to Mr. Branko Lustig for his relentless support.

Thank you for your attention.

(Translated by Tina Mahkota)