

Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World
Dr. Azra's remarks at Wednesday, April 13 session

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the beginning, I would like to express how satisfied I am with organization of this event. It is truly a great example of how one well outlined and strong idea, such as the idea of democracy, can unite people, knowledge, languages, preoccupations and different opinions in one specific form of unity with motivation, of course, to create a better future.

Allow me to salute you all on behalf of democratic BIH – a country of stormy past, whose history is the best witness that the highest values of democracy do not exclusively belong to any culture or civilization. The multireligious character of BIH, free and gradual acceptance of Islam, respect for rights of non Muslims, changing through different construct of civilization, impoverishment and strengthening of the Islamic Community are just some steps on the long road BIH has passed. In recent history, BIH has faced aggression on democratic values, freedom, multiculturalism, customs, institutions and closeness of common people. Our readiness to defend and preserve values of freedom, human rights and truth were stronger than brutality of the aggression, power of guns and hatred. Can anyone doubt that we belong to free, democratic and tolerant world? Can anyone doubt our commitment to values of modern world?

Ladies and gentlemen,

We witness numerous discussions and different views of political liberalization and democratization of Islamic societies which refers to a controversy that today's world is facing. One thing is for sure, it is impossible to observe them outside a context of deep social, cultural, political and other implications. Sometimes, they are reflection of different views of the future, and sometimes a result of societies' internal dynamics which consequences cannot be underestimated no more. It is, thereby, needless to outline the importance of adding our voice to the international discourse on systems of governance.

On one hand, pressures of sudden economical changes, a new era of enormous possibilities impose a need to reshape societies in accordance with newly developed circumstances. It is almost strange that we are simultaneously facing numerous crises of institutions and values; universal problems appearing in all societies are complex and influence each other in specific ways. Understanding their nature and dimension and establishing different systems and game rules with changed global priorities are imperatives of our time and special democratic commitment to transform this "traumatic period" into a threshold of a new evolutionary step. In this period in which we sense no perspective and lack of coherent baseline concept for overcoming partial interests, a time has come to settle a score, to negotiate, coordinate and to come to an understanding. Logically, it is necessary to open our eyes and our minds to the future which is

impossible without radical changes, new rules and strategies of directing development both at national and international level. There are no more “stagnant civilizations” or separate views of our future. Whether we want it or not, we are equaled in what is good and bad. Consequently, we need to share a sense of unity, common future and common interests and goals.

This must not be uniformity – diversities are the key for adaptation, but it is the kind of diversities that must be harmonized and brought down to the level of mobility, that is, into the framework of borders, which do not question the common interests.

What do we need to do?

1. I think it is very important for us to analyze the objectives of different regions, ideologies, and religions and then assess to what extent these objectives are common.

We should not shun away from doing this because we will probably be surprised by the fact that similarities are more frequent than the differences between the customs, habits, family relations, tastes, languages, games, attitudes, and cuisine.

2. We must learn about the different objectives – recognize the different affiliations and we must seek for the common ideas by means of dialogue. It is of crucial importance that I remind you all of our history, which besides its positive sides also produced many stupid things, mistakes and delusions about the development being a linear process of imitation based on a simple model. These delusions must be eliminated.

Development as a combination of rationality and culture must be harmonized with the needs of a society. Every nation has its beliefs, ways of life, social structures, cultures, which are not completely in accordance with one another and therefore the development must not exclude those who believe in it.

3. It is necessary to identify and define the common interests and be ready to change your own interests. This means that everyone has got to make a sacrifice. We all know that no society likes to change, however, nowadays we must accept that no society will live a long life unless it embraces a change. Accordingly, the most significant changes must occur in people and their relations with one another. This process is not about the destruction of diversity in religious, philosophic, human and moral values. On the contrary, these values foster the strength and vitality of democracy on social and intellectual level and they will live much longer than we will.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The way we understand some phenomena and processes depends on the way we see the world around us. I see this as a very important aspect that needs emphasizing because this is where a series of challenges lies as well as a number of dilemmas related to the numerous issues of the world, especially those that have to do with our future.

We are often victims of many prejudices, taboos, motivations of another time, ways of thinking and attitudes that are totally incompatible with the new stage of development

and new development prospects. Our ability to control our own future relies heavily on our wisdom and true strength rather than on our political power. Yet again, the politics rule our destinies although it is usually dominated by particularism, bizarre and monstrous ideas, narrow minds, dogmatism, and fanaticism. The politics feed on motives while the motives feed on the most secret aspirations. It is no coincidence that it sometimes seems that the social, economic and political processes are governed by the unknown forces and are a matter of fate. When looked at from a realistic point of view, these processes are in fact a matter of human decisions that are made in accordance with certain values and observations and they consequently result in aspirations and goals. It is no coincidence that the cause of many problems lies in people and their pursuit of often-wrong objectives – these objectives are often wrong not only because they do not meet our needs but also because they do not respond to the requirements of the time that is ahead of us. Our cultures and religion are used in the name of democracy as well as in the name of dictatorship. Some see Islam as the sovereignty of God, while the others see it as a framework for the sovereignty of nation. While the discussions of this kind are narrowed down to the discussions of tradition and modernism in the name of sovereignty as a religion of the contemporary society, nowadays we witness the appearance of nationalism, dictatorship, militarism, and racism. Additionally, the accentuated dependence of the international environment, the necessity of international trade, the effects of major capital, the technological development and integrations are eating away the national sovereignties and shed the light on the urge for the change of the very attributes of sovereignty.

Furthermore, the experience shows that the very principles of sovereignty, the structure and the work of the government and its institutions are very often of a short-term nature. That kind of attitude on the one and the demands of the time we live in on the other side could be dealt with by means of corrective actions in past. However, we no longer live in those “ages of mercy.” Nowadays we are much more sensitive in regard to the consequences of those short-term actions and orientations. This peculiar determinism of civilization, narrow and shortsighted interests and objectives can only lead towards narrow minds and limited possibilities for further progress. The system of values plays a key role in definition and pursuit of our objectives – it represents an opportunity but at the same time it points out numerous limitations.

I urge us to understand that a unity is not only a simple sum of its components. It is also important to realize the significance of the need to take into account all dimensions of a human unity and the variety of aspects that must be considered in the assessment of relations in order to outgrow individual analyses. This certainly is a peculiar “shift of consciousness,” moral imperative of the social development, absorption of the humanism that among other things requires reshaping of the knowledge and attitude towards religion as well as finding out the way to accordingly contribute to the reconstruction of the society. Otherwise, this can be used as an alibi for the ignorance and consequently become subject to misuse of religious emotions, symbols and conceptions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are witnessing some wrong interpretations of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, the “clash of civilizations,” and such. In that respect I wish to remind you all of few significant parallels in the understanding of relations between Islam and democracy.

Although the holly *Qur'an* and *Hadith*, that is *Sunna*, do address the society as a whole they also promote individual accountability. The democratic understanding of liberty is based on individual freedoms, which indicates that there are no conflicts in the conceptual understanding of the foundations upon which the democracy lies. The holly *Qur'an* calls for a freedom in relation to human repressions and accordingly human freedom is the basis of Islam in which there are no mediators. Equality of all men (before God's punishment), justice and ethical code of conduct based on human's subjection to divine laws, *shura* (consultation) which envisions the leader as the first one amongst the equal, are just a part of the foundations of Islam.

The holly *Qur'an* says that, “God created all nations and tribes so that they can get to know one another,” which calls for recognition of the others and insurance of their rights. I refer to the very first command of the holly *Qur'an* - *Iqra'* (the knowledge) and furthermore the openness to new knowledge – according to which the Islamic culture is referred to as the culture of *Iqra'* (the culture of knowledge, readings and openness to new knowledge). I deem it important to remind you of the historic role of Islam as a

mediator, “the mailman” of classical as well as of contemporary civilization which reflects its ability to connect and its accountability.

This brief overview indicates that the basic problem does not lie in the Islamic culture, religion or philosophy but rather in people, their ignorance and wrong interpretations.

These, of course, are just few of the challenges that we are faced with and which we must resolve by means of the indisputably needed dialogue. It will be my utmost pleasure if this comes as an inspiration for our joint contribution to the resolution of some key problems of the today’s world aimed at the creation of the better future for the generations to come.

Thank you!