

**Liina Kersna**

**Minister of Education and Research of the Republic of Estonia**

**General Policy Debate of the 41st General Conference**

Mr President of the General Conference, Madam Director-General,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Estonia aligns itself fully with the statement delivered by the European Union.

At this General Conference, we celebrate UNESCO's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Just a few weeks ago, Estonia celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our membership in UNESCO. During these years, we have become increasingly engaged in UNESCO's activities. We value UNESCO's commitment in the promotion and protection of human rights for all, and in mainstreaming gender equality and the empowerment of women across all goals and targets.

For over a year and a half, no decision has been possible without considering the COVID-19 crisis. We welcome UNESCO's leadership in keeping schools open. Understanding that schools must be the last ones to close has been a guiding principle around the world, including in Estonia. As we enter another year of COVID-19, exchanging the best practices as an international community will help us minimize its devastating impact on learners. As a central idea of the ministerial Global Education Meeting, we must work together to increase investments into education. We must mitigate the learning gaps caused by distance learning, and set forth the role of education as a driving force in coming out of this crisis.

We are proud to note that UNESCO has taken a lead in several landmark initiatives in response to current challenges: through the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, and the Recommendation on Open Science. We believe that the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) outweighs its challenges. AI has the potential to empower all people, provided they are developed, deployed and governed in a way that aligns with democratic values and human rights. We will work to foster trustworthy, secure, and ethical AI that reflects our shared values and commitment to protecting the rights and dignity of all our citizens.

We welcome the Recommendation on Open Science for its timeliness and for its power to become a tool for addressing systemic difficulties faced in science, technology, and innovation – in a context where urgent social and environmental issues are increasingly connected. I

believe that the true timeliness of this Recommendation lies in its power to open up scientific thought and evidence-based decision-making, in times where the spread of misinformation is unprecedented, posing a threat to our democratic core values.

Among key developments, Estonia is particularly glad to note its accession to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. This is a milestone both in practical terms, as well as for contributing to SDGs, mutual understanding, and increased international exchange. We hope that other countries will follow, and that the Convention will enter into force soon.

It is essential to engage youth in the discussions related to global challenges and UNESCO's mandate. Estonia hopes that the 12th UNESCO Youth Forum, held online during this General Conference, provides future change makers with the platform to contribute to the global dialogue on the effects of COVID-19 and building back better after the pandemic.

Distinguished delegates,

UNESCO has made great efforts to make the role of culture in sustainable development more visible. In the face of the pandemic, we appreciate the work done by the Culture Sector to facilitate, support and promote continued access to culture, including through the “ResiliArt Movement” and the preparations for the Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development Conference MondiaCult to be held in Mexico City next year. Estonia is ready to work with UNESCO and other UN agencies to protect multilingualism and indigenous languages in particular through contributing to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032).

The gripping reality of armed conflicts and ongoing crises in the world challenge UNESCO's ability to respond to destruction of cultural heritage, including organized looting and illicit trafficking. Estonia appreciates the work done by the Heritage Emergency Fund to respond to a wide range of emergencies affecting heritage and we are proud to be one of its donors.

Estonia recognizes the valuable work done by UNESCO in promoting freedom of expression online and offline and the safety of journalists. The recent global study „Online Violence Against Women Journalists“ testifies to UNESCO's increased focus on threats faced by women journalists. Joint efforts of all stakeholders, including the civil society, must continue. Estonia is contributing to the global debate following the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration

and will host the Global Conference for Media Freedom that will take place in Tallinn from February 9 to 10 next year.

Estonia wishes every success to Ms Audrey Azoulay for her second term as the Director General. As the next mid-term strategy is about to be adopted, UNESCO should continue its active engagement with the broader UN reform effort. We are confident that commitment to Strategic Transformation will ensure a more effective and efficient delivery of UNESCO's mandate.

Thank you!