



## **Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at a session of the Interreligious Council of Russia attended by Mr. Miguel Moratinos, High-Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations**



*On January 21, 2021, the Interreligious Council in Russia (ICR) held an extraordinary session at the Grand Hall of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations to meet its guest, Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos, United Nations Under-Secretary-General, High Representative for the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).*

"Dear participants in the meeting, I am glad to welcome you today to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.

At the invitation of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our parliamentarians Mr. Miguel Moratinos, High-Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, has arrived in Russia to discuss preparations for the World Conference on Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue due to take place

in Moscow in May 2022. Dear Mr. Moratinos, allow me to cordially greet you on behalf of the Interreligious Council of Russia.

I know that you have already had fruitful meetings with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sergey Lavrov, and with the Speaker of the Federation Council, Ms Valentina Matviyenko, as well as with the leadership of the Group of Strategic Vision "Russia – Islamic World". It seems very important to me that today you are meeting with the heads and leading representatives of our country's traditional religious communities, who are members of the Interreligious Council of Russia. Chairman Emeritus of this organisation is His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. In Russia, representatives of different traditional religions and cultures have peacefully coexisted for many centuries, which helped the country accumulate extensive experience of interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

We immediately expressed our support for an idea to set up the Alliance of Civilizations High-Level Group which since 2005 has been functioning under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General, and over the years that followed we have been watching its activities with interest. Speaking at the Alliance Forums and at the meetings with its leadership, the Church representatives have voiced an important thought: this initiative could be even more successful if it implied promoting direct dialogue between religious associations and the world community. In this regard, we proposed to establish an advisory council of religions under the UN auspices. This idea has not lost its relevance. We are convinced that preparations for the international conference on intercultural and interfaith dialogue due to take place in Russia in May 2022 and bring together heads of states, parliamentarians and world religious leaders cannot be carried out without the participation of the heads and representatives of traditional religions. I hope that today's meeting will make its contribution to the preparatory work.

I would like to say a few words about the Interreligious Council of Russia. The Council was established 23 years ago, in December 1998, by the leaders of our country's traditional religions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. The Council has been successfully providing the opportunity for maintaining interfaith accord and resolving various arising issues that pertain to the dialogue between the religion and the state.

The Interreligious Council of Russia is guided in its activities by the principles of direct, equitable and open dialogue. It leaves out debates on theological issues which divide us, focusing instead on the topics of common interest, such as traditional family morality, protecting the life of unborn children, fighting against the spread of the extremism ideology, and many others.

Since its foundation and to this day, the Interreligious Council of Russia has been actively engaging in working out key decisions in the sphere of state-religious and interfaith relations in our country. We can state that the Council's activities and statements have reflected the most significant problems and

developments which concern our society. It shows that today religious communities play a pivotal role in the life of the country and can make a great contribution to the strengthening of social peace and solidarity.

It is crucially important to us that the leaders of different religions represented in the Council almost always hold the same views on topics under discussion. It enables us to express consolidated position on various public, moral and social issues, while each of the religious communities preserves its doctrinal integrity.

As an example of achievements of the Interreligious Council of Russia, I can mention the recognition of theology as an academic discipline in Russia. After decades of theomachy, after a long and difficult period of fighting, religious communities in our country managed to ensure fairness in the attitude towards the theological science.

We are well aware that concord in relations between traditional religions is a pledge of strong and thriving society, as well as the best preventive measure against radicalism. Our country does not know such phenomena as Islamophobia and antisemitism. The Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations under the President of the Russian Federation fulfils its major function by providing opportunities for the interaction between the President and the religious organisations, helping strengthen social concord, tolerance, and mutual understanding and respect with regard to the freedom of conscience and belief.

The last time the Interreligious Council of Russia convened was in the late February 2020. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic changed the Council's plans for 2020. To our great regret, some of our communities' members, who for many years actively promoted interfaith relations, have passed away, falling victim to the aftereffects of the COVID-19 infection. The Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia, which was one of the founders of our Council, suffered an irreplaceable loss on 1st May 2020: Zinovy Kogan, eminent Russian religious and public leader, died at the age of 78. Zinovy Kogan had been an active member of the Interreligious Council of Russia from the moment of its establishment. He had outstanding charisma, sense of humour, profound worldly wisdom and cordial kindness appreciated by everyone who knew him. On behalf of all the Council's members I would like express condolences to Chief Rabbi of Russia Adolf Shayevich who is present here.

The pandemic has become a serious challenge for our country's religious communities. We have lost many of our brothers and sisters. I know that each of our communities has been working intensively, rendering aid to those affected by the epidemic.

Religious communities of our homeland have always emphasised the significant role that the United Nations play in promoting peace and mutual respect on the planet. For instance, in 1977 religious leaders from all over the world gathered in Moscow for a world conference. During that conference they stated: "We confirm our resolute support for the United Nations as the humanity's instrument for ensuring peace and safety. The UN is a hope for humankind, and despite its limited powers, we support it, inasmuch as there is no other alternative for the human race. Religious leaders and believers should play an important role in rendering assistance to the United Nations."

Over the subsequent years, our country's religious leaders supported in every possible way various interfaith initiatives and organisations, including the World Conference of Religions for Peace affiliated with the United Nations.

Today we have a new reason to speak about the global interfaith conference due to take place in Russia in May 2022. So, I would like to give the floor to our guest who supervises this matter on behalf of the United Nations. Mr. Moratinos, we will be glad to hear you. You have the floor."

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