Kersti Kaljulaid  
President of the Republic of Estonia  
General Policy Debate of the 40th General Conference  

Mr President of the General Conference, Madame Director-General, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,  

Let me first stress that Estonia aligns itself fully with the statement to be delivered by the European Union.  

As a small nation, that became the member of UN and its bodies, including UNESCO, only in 1991 after regaining its independence, Estonia is a strong believer in multilateralism as a tool to address the global challenges of our time. We will carry this responsibility in less than 8 weeks in the UN Security Council. Yesterday I had the opportunity to participate in the inspiring event “Rethinking multilateralism with young change-makers” held in this very house. Along with my fellow Heads of State and Government I was able to meet young leaders from all over the world and exchange views on ways to strengthen global cooperation in our increasingly digital and artificial intelligence influenced world. The debate showed clearly that youth is ready to take action and leadership.  

Given its mandate, UNESCO is well placed to develop *ethical principles of artificial intelligence*, a task that UNESCO is aiming for. And let me stress that the development of technologies we commonly call AI, is an opportunity for humankind. It is essential to make sure that AI technologies are developed with clear ethical standards that respect human rights and are based on the rule of law. We must use the tools of multilateralism to reach common positions on how universal human rights, the protection of national sovereignty and other wide principles of international law would apply at every technical level. There is no need to agree on a new legal space. We simply need to understand how everything which applies in the analogue world, also stands true in the digital domain. Close coordination with other international organisations working with the AI needs to be ensured in this process. The role of technology in education and the importance of technology-related skills’ development of all learners and educators should also be emphasized. Initiating an overall global debate on what the future may hold in the context of education is crucial. UNESCO´s initiative on Futures of Education is a visionary exercise, encouraging the world to think further from 2030, to address
education and learning 2050 and beyond. Digital disruption has changed our societies, including education, and we need to radically rethink the ways our children are taught. Next generations need to be ready for the new challenges. Times have changed and we need to discover new ways of how to support learning. And I firmly believe that integral part of the new 21st century curricula is also to educate our children to be compassionate human beings.

Estonia fully supports UNESCO in its important mandate in the protection and promotion of human rights both offline and online. Integrating a human rights perspective into all of UNESCO’s activities across sectors is crucial for building new societies. The cornerstones of such societies are free flow of information, freedom of expression and access to independent media. We strongly support UNESCO’s work for the safety of journalists and advancing freedom of expression. One part of this work also relates to UNESCO’s activities in monitoring of the situation in the illegally annexed Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. Estonia appreciates the steps taken by UNESCO in implementing the decisions of the Executive Board in this regard and looks forward to continued action on this issue.

We welcome the work done by UNESCO in the framework of the current International Year of Indigenous Languages. As a member of the Steering Committee of the International Year, Estonia has witnessed focused efforts that have resulted in a wider global attention to the urgent need to preserve and promote indigenous languages. We look forward to continuing working with UNESCO as the lead agency for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. My own language - Estonian - is spoken by about a million people. Therefore, we know well the importance of preserving one’s language that conveys cultural identity and contributes to diversity.

The convening power of UNESCO is demonstrated also in its standard setting work. Estonia fully supports the elaboration of a new recommendation on open science aiming at making scientific research and data accessible to all and recognizing the role of inclusive science for the fight against poverty and inequality. The new global convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education contributes to SDGs, strengthens academic mobility, and promotes international cooperation.

We very much appreciate and support the activities undertaken by UNESCO to strengthen its action to safeguard cultural heritage under attack and in emergencies and to facilitate a
coordinated international response. UNESCO **Heritage Emergency Fund** is an important mechanism in this field and we are proud to be one of its donors. Estonia is also looking forward to contributing to the better global implementation of the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols and therefore has decided to present its **candidature to the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict** at the upcoming elections in December.

UNESCO has also made great efforts to place culture at the heart of the 2030 Agenda in a cross-cutting manner by developing draft **thematic indicators for culture** that would support and complement the global indicators of the 2030 Agenda.

The ongoing **Strategic Transformation** is instrumental for ensuring UNESCO's integration in the UN reform process and for strengthening UNESCO's role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Next year the UN will turn 75 and it will be 74 years since the formation of UNESCO. We have a lot of long-standing and challenging issues to tackle, like climate change or delivering on UNESCO’s global priorities - Africa and gender equality. But as said, we also have new emerging challenges related to new technologies. We want UNESCO to be ready to lead by fully benefiting from the technological advantages of humankind. And we wish that as we see multilateralism in crisis, everybody would understand that there is no better alternative for multilateralism. No better alternative for UNESCO.

Thank you for your attention.