SPEECH OF H.E. ALTAY CENGİZER
PRESIDENT OF THE 40TH UNESCO GENERAL CONFERENCE
AT THE CLOSING OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE
(Wednesday, 27 November 2019)

Madame Director General,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,
Distinguished Heads of Delegation,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank, in utmost sincerity, all the delegations for making this 40th Session of the General Conference one that is to be especially remembered in years to come. Our proceedings do not only reflect a whole series of eloquent and convincing interventions, but go far to offer a trove of meaningful and relevant points of reference that will guide us. The Committees and commissions worked hard and with devotion to fulfil their duties. Their reports cannot only be seen as mere compilations. They are to be read carefully as they point to where we stand right now, and towards where we can go all together. I thank them all and also, of course, the Legal Committee.

I particularly wish to welcome the interventions from Small Island Developing States. After all, they constitute the other half of Planet Earth. For those members who came from far away places and who might have departed, I say thank you and see you again at the 41st General Conference, here in Paris at UNESCO Headquarters.

On the whole, we had an enlightening discussion with a high number of interventions. Madame la Directrice Générale, the distinguished Chairman of the Executive Board, myself, and all those persons that were sitting at the dais, listened very carefully to your interventions, which I can only describe as powerful. I believe this discussion that we have had over a week enriched us all in a unique way, and I was happy to see that the delegations were listening to each other carefully.
You made this gathering wonderful. The videos and proceedings of this General Conference should be taught in universities, because listening to our debates would enrich future diplomats.

The morning of 12th November is far different than this evening of 27th November... Because we all reached higher moral grounds by our eloquent defence of our positions. However, let me, at this juncture, remind you of the high number of abstentions during the votes. Abstention does not reflect an incapability to make a decision. Abstention means that given the present context, and with the amount of information supplied, especially with regard to the implications of a certain resolution, a delegation was not able to arrive at an informed decision.

Hence, it would be worthwhile for everyone if we can be more in contact with each other, and start a genuine conversation. I undertake today, before you, to play my part in this noble effort.

Donc, j’ai toutes les raisons de croire qu’une période fructueuse et moins controversée de deux ans nous attend. Nous clôturons la 40e session de la Conférence générale renforcés et avec un moral élevé.

Nous irons de l’avant. Nous voyons déjà les années suivantes comme une chance, plus que toute autre chose. Une chance, en effet, de conduire l’UNESCO au premier rang parmi les autres agences du système des Nations Unies, de lui conférer une pertinence unique alors que nous nous efforçons de traiter efficacement les questions les plus importantes d’aujourd’hui.

I am talking about the real issues of today. Let us not forget that UNESCO has the potential to become a “game changer,” because it has the capabilities and expertise to deal effectively and creatively with the contemporary issues of great importance.

Let us remember that we have just received a “bleak” U.N. report talking of a planet in peril. This is only one issue among many that our Organization is capable to work towards creative solutions and help the decision-makers.

A San Diego-based company is experimenting with drones that can locate whales and warn nearby ships to slow down... With Artificial Intelligence,
researchers are trying to predict, treat and block breast tumors, because we now have machines that register subtle changes that humans cannot.

I have recently watched a video showing polar bear Tonja letting her cub off to water for the first time at the Berlin Zoo... What a beautiful animal... What are we going to do if they are to disappear?

Ladies and gentlemen,

A few months after his election as Director General in 1953, Luther Evans undertook a tour of visits to Member States. Some weeks later when he came back to Paris, he called the directors to a meeting in his office at the Hotel Majestic, and told them that UNESCO was an intergovernmental organization and the Secretariat should not be subversive. That is, UNESCO should work with governments and not against them. Apparently, the intergovernmental nature of UNESCO created a certain level of tension from the very start. This is inescapable, but it is nothing to be worried about, let alone dramatized. We can work with each other, and continue to strengthen the Secretariat.

We can formulate our national positions. While doing so, we can take into account many factors. We can think about our national interests... There is nothing wrong in this. But what about our truly higher interests, our many interdependencies which continue to augment, rather than shrink? There should be a way out... Formulating our national positions in the UNESCO context can help us all. That is, formulate in the usual way, but at the same time, take into account the UNESCO context. Here we stretch national interests so as to produce in greater quantities the public goods that states, left to their own means, would under-produce.

Distinguished Delegates,  
Madame Director General,

The position of the President of the General Conference is an *ad personam* position. But it does not mean that the President should be a *heimatloss*, someone without a country, without a passport. Thank God, we are all nationals of different countries. I therefore would like to thank the Turkish
Government which showed confidence in me, that I can remain justful and unblemished through the execution of my duties.

I am thankful to my capable and hard-working Delegation, especially Ms Eylem Tandoğan, the Deputy Permanent Representative, for taking due care of the incessant daily business of the Delegation. I also thank those members of the Delegation who arrived to Paris for the General Conference, especially to Professor Öcal Oğuz who presides our national commission.

I thank heartily,

---The Vice-Presidents of the 40th session of the General Conference,
---The Chairman of the Executive Board, H.E. Mr Byong-hyun Lee,
---Notre Directrice Générale, esteemed Madame Audrey Azoulay,
---The Deputy Director General, Mr Xing Qu,
---The Chairpersons of different Committees and Commissions,
---Our Legal Advisor, Mr Santiago Villalpando,
---The Secretary of the General Conference, Ms Karima Bekri-Lisner – I wish her best of every luck in her future endeavours,
---Ms Bekri-Lisner’s dedicated and hard-working team; let me say that I was amazed with their knowledge and efficiency:

Mr Luis Salamanques  
Ms Anna Bonetti  
Ms Catherine Thiounn  
Ms Lynda Zerguine  
Ms Eunice Ong  
Ms Sandra Gallet  
Ms Nathalie Hellec,
and, of course, my Personal Assistant, Ms Irena Caquet.

Last but not least, I thank those who ensured the smooth-running of this session; the interpreters, the technicians, the clerks and the support staff.

I repeat that my door is open to everyone, that I will be accessible in the rooms and approachable in the corridors.

Thank you all so very much!