

Speech by

Vera El Khoury Lacoueilhe
Chairperson of the Executive Board

at the opening of

Russian Language Day

(6 June 2024)

Excellencies,
Ambassadors of the Russian Federation, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan,
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan,
Dear colleagues,
Dear friends and guests,

A language is so much more than “words”. It is an important part of our shared history and heritage. It is also a means of communication and understanding between people and is essential for progress towards sustainable development and harmonious relationships in a local and global context.

Language shapes our thoughts, expressions and connections with others. But language is also shaped and enriched by our own cultural diversities and identities.

Language functions like a bridge between cultures and peoples. It is indeed a vital part of individuals peaceful coexistence.

When a language disappears, parts of our shared history and heritage disappears with it, as well as opportunities, traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking and expression.

Language shapes the way we think. When we speak a different language, we somehow perceive the world differently and this is the greatest wealth we can possess.

The international community has adopted a wide range of agreements to promote and protect languages, and in this field, UNESCO plays an essential role in advocating, supporting and monitoring policies and actions in favour of cultural diversity and multilingualism at the international level. UNESCO has developed a number of standard-setting instruments to that end such as the “*Convention against Discrimination in Education*” and the “*Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace*”.

Dear Colleagues,

The Russian language is one of the most widely spoken Slavic languages, with over 250 million speakers globally. It is the primary language of Russia and is also widely spoken in many other countries including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Russian Language Day was established in 2010 by the United Nations and the 6th June was chosen to coincide with the birthday of Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet and the father of modern Russian literature.

Language is one of the most inclusive forms of art we know.

The historical significance and rich literary heritage of the Russian language is reflected through the works of iconic writers like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Boulgakov and others who left an indelible mark on global literature.

But other notable writers have also made significant contributions to literature in Russian.

To cite just a few:

The Armenian writer, **Narine Abgaryan**, famous for an autobiographical novel and named among the brightest authors in Europe.

Chingiz Abdullayev, a well-known Azerbaijani author who writes primarily in Russian and is famous for his detective novels, which have gained popularity throughout the Russian-speaking world.

Olzhas Suleimenov who I had the honour to work with when he was Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Kazakhstan to UNESCO, is a celebrated Kazakh writer and poet who writes in Russian. His works often explore themes of Kazakh identity and history, blending them with broader Russian contexts.

Chingiz Aitmatov, though primarily known for writing in Kyrgyz, also wrote extensively in Russian. His book, "Djamila" was described by Aragon as "the most beautiful love story of the world".

Temur Zulfiqorov a well-known and inspiring Tajic poet and novelist,

Erkin Vohidov an Uzbek playwright and poet who wrote in Russian but also translated Russian authors to Uzbek.

These writers have enriched Russian literature with their diverse backgrounds and unique perspectives, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the Russian-speaking world.

Celebrating a language acknowledges the true value of multilingualism, a subject at the heart of some of UNESCO's actions.

Today we are here to celebrate men and women who have contributed to enriching a language with their cultures, identities, and individual histories. People who believe that language should always be used as a vector of cultural diversity, mutual respect, intercultural dialogue and peace.

Spasiba.