STATEMENT BY H.E. MR. MIROSLAV LAJČÁK, PRESIDENT OF THE 72ND SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES 2017

Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me at the outset congratulate the organisers and sponsors of this event for bringing us together to celebrate this important occasion. The International Day of Persons with Disabilities was declared 25 years ago. We can agree that, as an international community, we have come a long way. We have made landmark achievements over this period. The most important being the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. That means full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

And yet, on this International Day, we recognize that there is much more left to be done. We must continue to strive to leave no one behind. This includes persons with disabilities.

The 2030 Agenda calls for a people-centered approach to sustainable development. In this spirit, I have put a focus on people at the core of my Presidency. If I look around this room it may appear that persons with disabilities are included and well represented.

But outside these halls, the reality is quite different. Persons with disabilities are often disproportionately affected by poverty. They face discrimination and exclusion. Every day they face challenges that affect their lives. That hamper their ability to contribute equally to the life of our societies. This is not only a violation of their rights, it’s a loss for our society and its diversity.

This is why specific references in the targets of the 2030 Agenda and other development frameworks are so important. We need to make the empowerment of persons with disabilities a priority at both the global and national levels.

Persons with disabilities must be included and participate in the crafting of development plans and policies. We must reflect their concerns and situations from start to finish, ensuring that they are both accessible and enabling. Today’s commemoration is therefore both timely and welcomed.

We at the United Nations have work to do. During the General Debate, I was confronted with how ill equipped the General Assembly Hall is for persons with disabilities. This was further reinforced when I gave a tour to a young person from Slovakia in a wheelchair. When we got to the General Assembly podium, it was inaccessible to her. These two examples beg the question: are we excluding persons with disabilities from equal participation in the work and leadership of the General Assembly?

The second point is that the United Nations must stand as a role model. When policies and agreements are being discussed; when decisions are being made; they must be inclusive and respect the interests and rights of persons with disabilities. And, persons with disabilities must, themselves, participate in these – and other – discussions.

It is a fact that there is progress in some areas. Physical access within the UN premises has improved. We are thankful for the Accessibility Centre here in New York and those involved in its establishment in 2013. Work is also being done on publications, webpages and digitalization of documents. In 2016, the Secretary-General submitted the first report on the full realization of an inclusive and accessible United Nations for persons with disabilities.

However, many of these measures only been possible thanks to voluntary contributions.

But there is still much more to do.

Documentation can now be acquired in accessible formats but we need to work towards having them in real time. Can we have better lighting and acoustics in the meeting rooms? How about sign language interpretation and close captioning for official meetings? We should also examine our signage to ensure they are well positioned for all users. These are the kind of suggestions made by persons with disabilities. They deserve our full consideration.

The United Nations must represent everyone – equally.

I will be pushing towards making the General Assembly inclusive, not just of states but of all people. So I want to state a public commitment today.

I am committing to championing accessibility issues during this Session.

• I am working towards having captioning and sign language for some of my key events, including on webcast.

• I am currently evaluating the accessibility of my website.

• I have appointed a focal point on accessibility in my office.

Furthermore, I will be actively engaging persons with disabilities in the discussions we have, including as panelists. Based on this, I would like to identify further actions that can be implemented in the short and the longer term. I will work with Member States, in particular the champions, like you, to make further progress.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, to move forward, partnership is key. I count on  your support and collaboration to advance this important effort.

I wish you fruitful discussions and a happy International Day of Persons with Disabilities.