

**OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND PROMOTING
MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING
(7-8 June 2007, Bucharest)**

Opening Plenary Session

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

I should like to start by saying a word of thanks both to you, Mr. Minister, and our Romanian hosts for organizing this traditionally exciting and inspiring event, more so as it has been graced by the moving statement of His Royal Highness. Generous hospitality of Romania will reset its traditional high benchmark for those who will strive to emulate it in organizing such meetings in the future.

It should be regarded neither as fortuitous nor a cause for pessimism that two years after the Cordoba Conference we have gathered once again to discuss how we can improve our record in tackling racism, xenophobia, discrimination and other forms of intolerance, not least because all these phenomena are alarmingly on the rise, despite the various commitments participating States have undertaken to address them and their progressive implementation. Posing a serious threat to democracy and human security, acts of intolerance and discrimination undermine social cohesion and jeopardize enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Therefore, combating them unreservedly and with enhanced determination should remain a top priority in the OSCE.

To begin, we must restate our unity in reaffirming that international developments and political issues can never justify racism, xenophobia and discrimination and in unequivocally rejecting the identification of terrorism and extremism with any religion, culture, ethnic group, nationality or race.

Mr. Chairman,

I recognize that every form of intolerance is unique. On the other hand, I equally recognize that in addressing different forms of intolerance and their manifestations common responses and strategies must unite us. I note with satisfaction that this specific understanding underpins the agenda of this conference. We, the participating States, should foster solidarity among different communities across the multiple forms of discrimination in a holistic and systematic way, and most importantly with the active and dedicated participation of civil society.

Having said this, I am also convinced that a holistic approach should be pursued in ways that allow addressing the specificities of particular forms of discrimination. Furthermore, bearing in mind that the OSCE is a regional security organization with finite resources, like in other fields of its activities, prioritization on the basis of its overall mandate and the taskings given at the political level is essential in the field of tolerance as well. This, however, should never

imply or be interpreted as establishing permanent hierarchies between various forms of intolerance, however, accepting that their currency will inevitably impose certain priorities.

This very spirit has put in place the necessary common backdrop for the participating States to agree on the appointment of three Personal Representatives by the Chairman-in-Office in 2004. Since then Personal Representatives have become the faces of the OSCE vis-à-vis the communities, the NGOs representing their objectives and interests and the national authorities in assisting their efforts to address intolerance and discrimination. They are the embodiment of the political will of the OSCE participating States to promote mutual respect and combat discrimination. This leads my delegation to make a strong pitch that we should strengthen the mechanism of the Personal Representatives through a reinforced mandate and upgraded resources.

Mr. Chairman,

Since 9/11, parallel to our collective efforts to fight terrorists who distort and abuse religion to serve their ideology of violence, we expressed a growing concern that those very measures and policies to fight terrorism may have discriminatory effect on Muslim communities. Sadly, our apprehensions have been transformed into reality much sooner and in a much more dramatic way than we predicted. Today, this particular strain of xenophobia manifests itself not only in public opinion polls but also in everyday life. Whether it is behavioral pattern on the street, treatment at airports or in custody, or biased portrayals in news columns or party manifestos, Islam and Muslims have become increasingly stigmatized, turning them into easy targets, satisfying the appetites of those who would rather create and demonize an enemy instead of embracing diversity as an asset to their societies.

These are ominous developments with multiple implications in terms of politics, human rights and security. We therefore commend and welcome the decision to organize another important conference this year in Cordoba on addressing *Islamophobia* in all its aspects, an event that would solidify the credentials of the OSCE and add to the list of successes of Spanish Chairmanship.

In this age of globalization where issues of promoting tolerance and non-discrimination as well as cultural and religious dialogue have gained strategic importance and embrace in international relations, a new international solidarity needs to be fostered and mobilized. In order to meet that global challenge, Spain and Turkey co-sponsored the Alliance of Civilizations initiative under the auspices of the United Nations Secretary General. We are pleased to see that the support given to this initiative has been continuously broadening since its inception. The contribution of the OSCE to the High Level Group of the Alliance last year was much appreciated by all concerned. We hope that the efforts of H.E. Mr. Sampaio, the newly appointed High Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, for the implementation of the recommendations of the report by the High Level Group will enjoy the support of the OSCE. We see it as the prerogative of the Chairmanship to decide as a follow-on step, how such support should materialize. We hope that creation of a special task force to elaborate OSCE's contribution to the implementation phase would fall within the scope of Chairmanship's options.

Mr. Chairman,

One of the novelties that this Conference introduces is to devote a separate session on racist, xenophobic and discriminatory discourse. We have all learnt the hard way through experience last year during the cartoon debacle that this is, to put it mildly, a delicate issue. How we construct the elite discourse in politics, media, education or research is particularly delicate at a time when the ideal of creating a “multicultural society” has almost been wiped off of the political agenda and lexicon.

Fortunately there are also signs that generate optimism in the OSCE area. States are more willing to take concrete action in the field of legislation, education and dialogue with the representatives of vulnerable communities. Political representatives have started, albeit timidly, to grasp the significance of distancing themselves from intolerant political discourse and the penalties involved when they do not. A lot more is happening in civil society to address the challenges at the local and community level. We look forward to hearing those good practices during the upcoming sessions. However, we should also not shy away from pointing out to situations where there is measurable deterioration and intensification of challenges. Hardened immigration policies and treatment of foreigners and refugees continue to pose one of the most complex challenges we have to face in terms of social justice. Let me conclude by sharing the expectation that this conference would come out with a strong message that migrants and their families legally residing in host countries do make significant contributions to the economic growth, welfare and cultural diversity of our nations.

As the text of my address will have testified, there is nothing in it that takes exception to the joint EU statement delivered by the Presidency. It must be a technical glitch that will have disallowed our association with it.

Thank you.