

## **OSCE 2007 Human Dimension Seminar**

**Warsaw 16-18 May 2007**

### **Effective Participation and Representation in Democratic Societies**

**Anastasia Crickley**

**Personal Representative to the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on combating  
Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also Focusing on Intolerance against  
Christians and Members of Other Religions**

Friends, I am grateful for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you on the final day of the seminar. Effective participation and representation in democratic societies are issues, which certainly merit the attention you have given them here in Warsaw. They are also discussed with varying degrees of self-congratulation, references to work in progress, or commitments to doing better throughout the OSCE region and beyond. As Personal Representative to the Chair-in-Office, I am increasingly conscious of the need to reflect rhetorical commitments in action which avoids hiding behind the smoke screens and fig leaves of cultural and or religious traditions, past history and colonial legacies – although I acknowledge, not least from the experience of my own country, that these have to be seen as part of the picture overall.

I am conscious too of the commendable efforts being made by a number of OSCE participating States to strengthen participation and ensure power sharing, which in effect, is what participation rather than mere consultation is about. However, standing here as a woman, I can only say that this at best is work in progress. Fully effective participation and representation in the democracies of the OSCE region requires conditions for equal access and participation by women in all decision making arenas. In spite of the exceptions easily pointed to as the rule, this remains a target rather than a truth.

This seminar set out to review the concepts and challenges in developing and established democracies for ensuring an authentic democratic process and the papers indicate that you have done so in a systematic and rigorous fashion. I will not attempt to cover ground already better covered. I will seek instead to add a few thoughts from my own experience of working and commenting on these matters at local national European and wider levels.

It is quite true that the higher levels of political awareness achieved, in part through mass communication globally, have brought with them higher levels of alienation from power holders and the processes which put them there. This has resulted, sometimes, in recourse to violence but more often in disengagement in particular from party political processes.

To begin to address this, political parties need to see themselves as part of rather than the controllers of political engagement. Governments need to facilitate open and critical participation in governance and policy-making by the many civil society organizations which give voice to concerns of importance for the future of democracy, but which can't emerge from the party political machine. This needs to be done without unrealistic demands, for civic society organizations to speak with one voice. There are, or should be more than one political party and more than one trade union in each participating state. That participation needs to be real rather than window dressing and requires time and patience for the creative tensions of open dialogue to yield a result for all. In my experience, this is best achieved through an honest starting point with governments recognizing their class, gender and minority representation limits, and civil society organizations acknowledging government's role.

The participation of civil society organizations in the OSCE is a useful example, which continues to challenge the organization, not just in terms of inclusion but also in terms of outcomes.

A prerequisite in participating states for any of this is the existence of free and open democratic political parties and free and open non-party politically aligned civil society organizations. These cannot emerge without rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly being guaranteed and guarded. The failure to guarantee these rights, and the right to their democratic peaceful expression reflects in my view a gap between democratic rhetoric and commitment to real participation. At the same time, this failure conveniently sweeps uncomfortable issues, which sit uneasily with religious or cultural consciences under the carpet. Such action does not render to disappearance the issue as a number of European Union member states, already bound by their obligations under the EU Equality Directives, know with regard to their more recent responses to lesbian, gay and overall LGBT issues.

It goes without saying that confidence in electoral processes is essential in this regard. I would like to take the opportunity to commend and congratulate Ambassador Strohal and his team and all the parliamentarians for the election monitoring they undertake throughout the OSCE and beyond, on our behalf. Further efforts are required, however, to ensure that elections and the periods leading up to them do not become opportunities for blaming and discrimination against minorities and marginalized groups.

Declarations and Charters for political parties and candidates at times of election, such as the one currently in use in my own country, can serve a useful if somewhat symbolic purpose in this regard.

The extent to which national minorities and under-represented groups participate in democratic societies is a further barometer of the extent to which those societies are truly democratic. Monitoring mechanisms for ensuring such participation and which support its effectiveness, including the Council of Europe's Framework convention on National Minorities, illustrate the gap between written rhetoric and lived experience in a number of instances. OSCE decisions and the Lund Recommendations you are familiar with, demonstrate the commitment of this organisation to supporting participation by minorities in the democratic processes of participating states. The work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities and his staff in particular, but also the work of ODIHR and OSCE missions as well as that of the Contact Point on Roma and Sinti issues actively and commendably support this participation.

However, in the OSCE Region as well as beyond, there remain considerable challenges to be faced before it can be said that there is adequate participation by National minorities and underrepresented groups in the decision making processes of participating States. There is no room for complacency anywhere, particularly if one recognizes the reality that adequate participation can not only mean participation by men from minorities but must also extend to the challenge of finding culturally appropriate ways for women to participate. It is not either in the interests of person from marginalized groups to hide behind ongoing historical and cultural discussions about what and who does and does not constitute or belong to a minority. The photographs of decision makers often speak for themselves. The reality is that inclusive decision making is in everyone's interests, minority and majority.

Creating the condition for successful participation by national and other minorities in decision making and democratic process, means, firstly, removing the barriers to such participation. Adequate legislation and policies to address racism and discrimination and its various forms are essential. These need to be used for the purpose for which they were designed rather than any other political or control agenda. Measures already in place to address discrimination towards particular groups need to be implemented and there, I cannot but note, that the OSCE Action Plan on Roma remains to be implemented in ways that would improve participation by one of the most marginalized groups in the OSCE. Positive action only becomes discriminatory when it goes beyond creating a level playing pitch, and as we women know, being from a marginalized group needs not to be confused with representing that group.

Finally, a word for the people whom all this about and whom you have been supporting through deliberations. The ongoing commitment of so many to participation by themselves and others, sometimes, even when it is life threatening, is awesome. It deserves and should receive our best support individually and collectively. I close with an expression of my appreciation of their contribution to the humanity of all.

Integration with respect to minorities is a challenge not only for policies with regard to new minorities, but also for minorities who have been part of participating states for generations, if not centuries. Attempts at assimilation have only served to exclude and marginalize these groups, describing them, for example, as Muslims in Europe, rather than European Muslims. Integration policies and principles need to acknowledge the marginalisation of these groups and, in particular, initiatives are urgently required to address the discrimination and social and economic exclusion they often experience.