

Delegation of the Russian Federation

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AFFAIRS, AT THE OSCE MEETING ON THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN RACIST, XENOPHOBIC AND ANTI-SEMITIC
PROPAGANDA ON THE INTERNET AND HATE CRIMES**

Paris, 17 June 2004

Closing session

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Colleagues,

We are grateful to the organizers of this meeting for the opportunity to hold an informative discussion on a subject that, first of all, is relatively new to our Organization and, secondly, is undoubtedly of importance for all participating States.

Today, especially in front of such an enthusiastic audience, there is no need to convince anyone of the extremely important and positive role that the Internet plays in modern society. Its infrastructure permeates the entire world and creates radically new horizons for communication and the free flow of information, vital for the development of stable democracy.

All the more justified, then, is our serious concern with the wave of hatred overwhelming some sites which spread racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and a cult of violence and enmity of global proportions. As we understand it, this is nothing other than an effort to provoke extremism and extreme forms of intolerance, which is especially dangerous for the young generation; even if, at present there is no simple and direct link between the propaganda of intolerance on the Internet and the majority of hate crimes. These crimes (including terrorism) have existed throughout the history of mankind, and today they are still largely perpetrated by people who either do not have access to the Internet or do not use it for objective reasons, including socio-economic ones. Here are some relevant statistics (for example, in the most "heated" and conflict-ridden regions — Latin America, Africa and the Middle East — the overall level of Internet usage is only 3.9 per cent, whereas the figure in Europe is 23.5 per cent and in the United States of America and Canada 55.9 per cent). These statistics show that intolerance largely flourishes in places where the infrastructure of the

Internet is the least developed. However, this by no means implies that we can stop worrying. The propaganda of hatred has an especially dangerous effect on the inexperienced user, on teenagers who do not have firm convictions or morals. For them, technological progress involves not only access to knowledge and freedom to receive information but also the risks associated with that. What can we do to counter this?

There is no doubt that we need to work together to find ways of effectively prosecuting criminals who sow the seeds of hostility. The Constitution of the Russian Federation prohibits “propaganda and agitation inciting social, racial, ethnic or religious hatred and enmity”. The Russian Criminal Code makes it a criminal offence to engage in “activities committed in public or using the media that are intended to incite hatred or hostility, and also the degradation of the dignity of an individual or a group of persons on grounds of sex, race, ethnic group, language, origin, religion or affiliation with any other social group”. Liability has also been established for a number of ethnically, racially or religiously motivated crimes or hate crimes. The crimes of spreading the propaganda of violence, extremism, terrorism, ethnic hostility and hatred are inadmissible and must be prosecuted by law in every instance. Freedom and responsibility are indivisible.

At the same time, we are convinced that the Internet itself is by no means guilty of hate crimes, and for that reason efforts to prevent hate crimes must not encroach upon the freedom to disseminate information via the Internet or upon freedom of information in general.

It is far more important that we educate Internet users from the earliest age in a spirit of tolerance. They are the ones who need to develop a strong immunity against intolerance, a kind of vaccination against the virus of hatred. A huge role in this process belongs to education, including education using the Internet. Today, online mechanisms already allow access to distance learning programmes, libraries, archives and encyclopaedias. For that reason, it seems to us that the pressing task is not one of restricting flows of information, but quite the opposite — namely increasing access to the Internet in the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, ensuring freedom of the media and the independence of Internet providers and resolving the problems of raising the personal and cultural level of users. A dynamic development of society along this path will reduce the possible effect of criminal propaganda and erect a moral and educational barrier to hatred.

It goes without saying that modern technology is making it possible to take steps at the national level to filter out sites containing criminal material. However, the experience of many countries has shown that such measures are ineffective and, what is more, detrimental to the free flow of information in general.

There is no standardized legislation and no common understanding of whether genuine crime is present in individual cases, and, if it is, whether it was in fact provoked by Internet propaganda. While information may appear legally in one country, it can be accessed in other countries, including those where it is considered criminal. One way of overcoming such discrepancies would be to conclude bilateral and multilateral agreements.

A second and possibly more effective way would be to actively counter xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic propaganda with propaganda of tolerance which is still more powerful and accessible, to condemn publicly these extreme manifestations of ethnic, religious and philosophical extremism.

A third way would be to encourage the closest possible co-operation between non-governmental organizations involved in human rights issues and other institutions of civil society with representatives of the media and the Internet industry and the authorities, whether law-enforcement agencies or educational establishments.

We are convinced that our Organization and its institutions are capable today of playing a considerably more important role than they have in the past in the creation of an educational and moral barrier to the propaganda of hatred, whatever channel is used for its dissemination. We welcome the efforts of the Bulgarian Chairmanship in this area and also the purposeful work of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media — his well-known Amsterdam Recommendations, more recent publications on the problems of the Internet and plans for holding conferences and seminars. We are certain that the results of the Paris meeting will serve as a constructive contribution to affirmation of the principles of tolerance throughout the OSCE area.