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SOCIAL COHESION, AT THE OSCE HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE
ON TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION (INCLUDING
HUMAN RIGHTS YOUTH EDUCATION ON TOLERANCE AND
NON-DISCRIMINATION)**

Tirana, 22 May 2013

**Plenary session 4: Combating intolerance and discrimination
against Muslims**

Ladies and gentlemen,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,

It was in 2006, under the Spanish Chairmanship, that we began our activities on the human dimension of the OSCE by organizing a parallel event on youth education. I think it is no accident that we have the privilege of speaking here today, and I thank the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for its efforts over several years to ensure improvements in the provision of fundamental rights

Of course, major progress has been made over the past seven years. The concept of “hate crime” has become fairly well known, particularly through training sessions on this issue. In this regard, the European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion was recently involved in running the Copenhagen training session. We will call upon the ODIHR regarding further such courses in future. The Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims are a major tool, and it is clear that the participation of Muslim non-government organizations (NGOs) in human dimension meetings means that the ODIHR has become indispensable for civil society organizations campaigning for human rights and fighting racism and discrimination. Seven years ago, the term “Islamophobia” was unwelcome at the OSCE. That remains the case to this day, although we attempted to arrive at a definition three years ago. In future we must move forward and include this topic in our work in order to act comprehensively and avoid becoming bogged down in terminology.

In the annotated agenda, you have been able to read about the advances that have been made and, above all, the remaining deficiencies on the issue of this session. I will try to come straight to the point because we need to use our time efficiently.

We live in an interdependent, diversified region. Intercultural and interfaith harmony and cohesion are more necessary than ever, as the very concept of a pluralist society is threatened by both religious and dogmatic prejudice and intolerance. West of Vienna, the greatest obstacle to establishing more peaceful relations between the majority and ethnic and religious minorities is the deep-held conviction that Western societies are “exceptional” and represent a model of civilization crowned with a shining light of freedom and supposed moral superiority over the non-Western world.

Owing to the growth of negative sentiments and stereotypes, Islam is now the largest religion in the world to be broadly and deeply misunderstood. It is widely perceived by Westerners as a vehicle for hatred, violence and intolerance. The main media outlets, as well as certain intellectuals and political figures, feed this illusion by repeatedly invoking the idea of exceptionalism through populist approaches and sensationalist discourses. They do this while refusing to promote constructive solutions to the problems faced by the general public. The gap is widened by the fact that there is an uneven playing field, which limits the capacity of Muslim communities to present their point of view intelligently or constructively. The OSCE remains an exception in terms of its openness, even though the need remains for better forms of representation.

Although most Western countries continue to view themselves as ethnically, culturally and religiously unidimensional and homogenous, a short stroll in any city to the west of Vienna demonstrates that multi-ethnic and multicultural life is now a reality.

Debates have raged for years about whether this evolution is positive, or whether it may have negative and dangerous consequences. Depending on the ideological and political position of each individual, points of view have varied and some political leaders have proclaimed the death of multiculturalism. For such politicians, the logical scapegoats were Muslims who refused to integrate. Nonetheless, increasing numbers of people are starting to promote the ideals of a fair, egalitarian and peaceful society in which people of different religions, ethnicities and cultures can live together in harmony, interact with one another and collectively enrich their lives. More and more people reject the idea that a single religion or culture can lay claim to a monopoly on knowledge and leave no room for alternative beliefs or identities.

It is clearly necessary not only to consider current manifestations of intolerance and discrimination, but also to recognize the historical, cultural and psychological depth of the issue. At the same time, no solid or complex legislative framework for the respect of human rights capable of setting boundaries for the public expression of hate exists at national or international level. An intellectual and ethical strategy is urgently needed to prevent the political exploitation of current events in order to stir up intolerance and discrimination.

Let us note that today, we are witnessing the deplorable renaissance of a disastrous era where people are once again classed as “the other” based on their identity, faith or culture. While the first step towards a multicultural and multi-faith society lies in protecting those who make up the diversity and wealth of our societies, each individual is reduced to their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. Those who do not conform to a set of values or behaviours are systematically demonized. We should be proud of our differences and we must learn to defend them, to give them space to flourish, to enrich others and to be enriched by others. In other words, we should ensure that “the other” is able to live as “the other.”

However, we observe that anti-Muslim discourses remain very present in the media or amongst politicians in many OSCE participating States. The fight against hate speech must not run counter to freedom of expression. At the same time, we observe that in many international conventions, freedom of expression has limits and is not absolute. It is therefore important to employ the available legal arsenal to combat discourses of hatred, *inter alia* through teaching and education, because punishment is not always productive.

Unfortunately, we can see that the implementation of this legislation, where Muslim communities are concerned, is largely inadequate. Stereotypes about the Muslim community mean that equality before the law remains in question. For this reason, it is necessary to educate all elements of society about Islamophobia, starting with legal authorities and law enforcement agencies.

In conclusion, the democracies to the west of Vienna face a genuine challenge which affects the guarantee of the fundamental rights of all of the citizens living on their territory. European cultural isolationism provides a platform for expressions of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all forms of hatred. Because of this, the positive dynamic towards coexistence is hindered by public discourses delivered by certain individuals present in the media. These figures, who exist in many countries and who populize Islamophobia, are true cultural terrorists who threaten our common future.

Furthermore, the populist political strategy of certain politicians, who play on fears and prejudices while limiting the space in the public arena where Muslim communities can express themselves, prevents the communication of democratic calls for equality and the respect of fundamental rights.

A January 2013 Ipsos survey in France shows the rejection of Muslims and of Islam and underscores the lack of awareness within our societies regarding the contribution of Muslim communities to prosperity and the existing social model. They are being singled out as the “other” in an increasingly violent way. This is why an OSCE meeting on the security of Muslims is becoming necessary and we trust that the current Chairmanship will engage itself in this regard because, unfortunately, Islamophobia has become normal and is largely institutionalized. Muslim communities need greater political and moral support from European decision-makers on issues of equality, the respect of human rights and full inclusion.

Unfortunately, Islam is still all too frequently connected to extremist violence and terrorism. It is perceived by some States as a security risk. The global fight against terrorism, which must be a shared fight, must not disregard human rights. All violent extremist groups or individuals must be handled with the same rigour. The presentation of the National Socialist Underground case in Germany or the Breivik case in Norway makes the terrorists appear even more likeable, whereas a driving offence committed by a Muslim can all too easily become an affair of national security.

Finally, neither Islam nor Muslims are homogenous. We must take account of this diversity to bring about a paradigm shift which should replace ideology with ethics and theology with human rights. It is in this way that we will see that Islamophobia is not limited solely to the issue of places of worship, the headscarf, Muslim cemeteries or Halal food. It has a devastating socio-economic effect in terms of access to employment, services, accommodation or education. On 5 July 2013, the ODIHR will hold an expert meeting at the

Council of Europe in order to present the ideas held within the Guidelines on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims. We invite participating States to support this effort by encouraging officials from their national education authorities to participate.