



OSCE High Level Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding

Bucharest, 7 June 2007

Opening Session

**Opening Remarks by Ambassador Christian Strohal
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Human Rights**

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Minister,

Secretary-General,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour to be at this Conference here in Bucharest and to address you on some practical aspects of our joint activities. The fight against intolerance and the promotion of mutual respect have emerged as clear OSCE priorities within the last five years. Since 2002, five specific decisions on tolerance and non-discrimination have been adopted by the Ministerial Council. These decisions have resulted in more than 50 specific commitments made by the 56 foreign ministers to intensify their efforts to fight racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination against Muslims, Christians and other forms of intolerance including against religious and belief communities.

Following conferences in Vienna in 2003, in Berlin, Brussels and Paris in 2004, the 2005 Conference in Cordoba and last year's three Tolerance Implementation Meetings, this Conference marks the 10th such event organized by the OSCE. In addition to these conferences and meetings, the last three Human Dimension Implementation Meetings have also devoted a full day session to the topic of the fight against intolerance and the promotion of mutual respect and understanding.

At the same time, my Institution, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, has been mandated to play an increased role in supporting participating States and civil society in their efforts to combat violent manifestations of intolerance and promote mutual respect and understanding. Over the last five years, my Office has received more than 30 direct taskings from the Ministerial Council. These have included serving as a collection point for legislation, statistics and good practices in the area of

tolerance and non-discrimination, closely following incidents motivated by racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, intolerance against Muslims and other forms of intolerance and reporting regularly on these issues. The ODIHR has also been tasked to support OSCE participating States and civil society in the areas of education, legislative assistance, law enforcement training, data collection and civil society capacity building. Additionally, OSCE States were encouraged to seek the assistance of the ODIHR's 60-member Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Looking at the large number of OSCE commitments, conferences and meetings, in between our discussions in Vienna, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Cordoba, Almaty, Dubrovnik and Warsaw, one must ask: What has concretely been achieved in practice? What effect have OSCE participating States, Institutions and field missions had in preventing and improving the response to crimes and other violent acts of hatred and intolerance?

Participating States have made considerable effort to follow-up on the implementation of their commitments, both at a national-level and in co-operation with others, including OSCE Institutions such as my own. An overwhelming majority of participating States have nominated National Points of Contact on Hate Crime, which have been providing my Office with updates on their legislative and data collection efforts as well as examples of good practices. Many States are taking advantage of the available tools of the ODIHR and other organizations, including teaching materials, training programmes and practical guidelines.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts, concerns remain:

- In many participating States, there have been an increasing number of hate-motivated incidents and violent acts of intolerance such as racism (including against Roma), xenophobia, anti-Semitism, intolerance against Muslims, religious based intolerance and homophobia.

- Incitements to commit violent acts are frequently communicated on and proliferated through the internet, in some cases even involving the disclosure of sensitive personal information which poses a serious threat to potential victims.
- Public discourse, manifesting itself in the media and through statements by political leaders – even if not explicitly or at all inciting hate-motivated violence – is increasingly contributing to a climate of intolerance, to a loss of trust and to mounting tensions with respect to particular groups or persons belonging to them.
- We note growing concerns about exclusion instead of ensuring respect for diversity and integration in pluralistic societies, and, in this context the danger of abuse of legislative and administrative frameworks in this regard.
- Lack of data on hate crime which hampers the ability of governments to develop effective policy responses.
- The tendency of presenting hate crimes as isolated cases and downplaying them as ‘hooliganism’ also persists in some of the OSCE participating States.
- Often, law enforcement agents demonstrate inadequate first responses to hate-motivated crimes thus undermining ‘victims’ trust to the overall rule of law.

More detailed comments about these trends and others will be presented by my Office in each session during this Conference.

Let me mention six results from the perspective of our own range of activities at the ODIHR.

First, since the last high-level OSCE conference in Cordoba, the ODIHR’s Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Programme, which was established in 2005, has been further consolidated. Within the Programme, staff are working hard in order to support the implementation of key decisions and to

address the specific dimensions of racism and xenophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination against Muslims and intolerance against Christians and members of other religions as well as cross-cutting issues such as legislative assistance, civil society capacity building and freedom of religion or belief. Clear priorities have been set within the Programme in order enable it to implement its taskings in a way which does not duplicate other actors and which focuses on the 'added value' of the OSCE. This includes its comprehensive and regional approach to security, including through its institutions and field missions, as well as its ability to provide practical tools and assistance to participating States.

A second result of the Programme is the approach and methodology it has developed to closely follow and report on racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic and homophobic incidents, including incidents against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions. In co-operation with governments and civil society, the ODIHR is following responses to incidents and highlighting positive examples of effective and immediate action. The first annual report on *Challenges and Responses to Hate-Motivated Incidents in the OSCE Region* will be presented during the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) that will take place in Warsaw from 24 September to 5 October.

Permit me in this context to highlight a topic which deserves our full attention. Racially-motivated incidents and crimes against Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area continue to be of concern. More needs to be done by participating States to effectively combat racist attacks against Roma and Sinti. Pervasive stereotypes and anti-Roma prejudice are fertile ground for hate-crime incidents. Concurrently, the gap in the socio-economic situation is rather widening than diminishing, which reinforces negative attitudes among the majority. Limited legal action or inaction by law enforcement and justice institutions following incidents against Roma and Sinti contributes to their feeling of insecurity and victimisation. In short, Roma continue to face

discrimination in access to legal housing and secure residence, employment, civil and voting registration, access of Roma Sinti children to quality education in a non-segregated environment.

I would like to stress that there is a need for more vigorous action and increased and better co-ordination of resources on the side of participating States in order to implement the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti. The ODIHR has started the process of reviewing and assessing its implementation. Our status report, which is based on inputs from OSCE States and civil society, will also be launched at the HDIM and will make further recommendations for action.

Thirdly, and in order to serve as a collection point for information on hate crime and issues related to tolerance and non-discrimination, the ODIHR has developed TANDIS – the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Information System which provides access to reports, practical initiatives and specific tools and resources for experts and practitioners. The public website also includes an overview of information submitted to the ODIHR by States, including legislation, statistics and good practices.

Fourth, while keeping in mind the specificities of the different forms of intolerance, the ODIHR has developed cross-cutting horizontal programmes in the areas of education, law enforcement, legislation, data collection and civil society capacity building. The ODIHR receives a growing number of requests for assistance in these areas. We have developed networks of expert practitioners (some of whom are here today) in order to maintain an expert-to-expert approach and to support the development of regional networks of experts in order to address hate crime as a trans-border phenomenon. More information on the concrete results of the ODIHR's assistance will be provided at 18:00 today at our side event. Let me also briefly add that we are, together with the Anne Frank House, developing educational material in the

field of combating anti-Semitism that is tailored to the specific historical experience and present needs within requesting participating States.

Fifth, in establishing and further consolidating the work of the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Programme, continuous efforts have been made to intensify cooperation with our partners within the Organization and beyond. Given the vast and rich experience and expertise of other inter-governmental organizations such as the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, efforts have been made in order to ensure that our work complements and reinforces their work. Such efforts include annual high-level co-ordination meetings, working level meetings and the use of ODIHR tools to support the implementation of policy and country-specific recommendations made by each organization. I would like to thank these organizations for our ongoing collaboration and co-operation.

In terms of strengthened co-operation within the OSCE, I would like to highlight the cooperation with my two colleagues and friends, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Representative on the freedom of the Media. The ODIHR has also assisted the Secretary-General in the context of the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative and provides ongoing support for the three Personal Representatives of the Chairman-in-Office in order to support their important role in raising awareness about specific issues and about OSCE commitments and actions. I would like to use this opportunity to thank Ms. Crickley, Ambassador Orhun and Professor Weisskirchen for their co-operation and support for the activities of my Office.

A sixth and final result I would like to highlight is the ODIHR's direct contacts and increased interaction and co-operation with governments and national experts. Through the 48 nominated National Points of Contact on

Combating Hate Crime, the ODIHR is now able to directly follow-up on the responses to incidents and to obtain relevant legislation and statistics. Through the implementation of its assistance programmes, the ODIHR also collaborates directly with governmental experts as well as various practitioners. The ODIHR has also established a solid network of civil society partners who regularly send reports and information which the ODIHR uses in its reports and in TANDIS. We are working with its civil society partners to develop a training programme to increase the capacity of civil society to monitor, report on and engage with government officials in addressing hate incidents.

I would like to conclude by noting that at past conferences, participants repeatedly stressed that the aim of OSCE States and civil society must be to move beyond “tolerating” and “integrating” other faiths and cultures towards understanding, appreciating, and respecting such communities and working to ensure their active engagement and participation as equal and valued members of their societies. I am pleased to see that the title of this conference reflects the desire to promote mutual respect and understanding, rather than merely tolerance.

I am also pleased to see that the organization of preparatory meetings with civil society representatives has become an institutionalized practice within the OSCE. I think that the depth and richness of the concrete recommendations from yesterday’s meeting highlight the invaluable role of civil society as essential partners of governments and OSCE Institutions in the fight against intolerance and the promotion of mutual respect and understanding.

There is clearly a significant amount of work still to be done; however, I believe that many mechanisms, structures and tools are available to support OSCE states and civil society to continue their efforts to combat intolerance and promote mutual respect and understanding.

In order to ensure that this Conference builds upon what has been said at previous events, my Office has prepared a comprehensive background note which contains a summary of relevant OSCE commitments, a compilation of recommendations from past conferences, a checklist of information (including statistics, legislation and good practices) submitted to the ODIHR by participating States and a list of ODIHR tools.

I encourage all of you to come up with concrete recommendations for follow-up discussion during the Special Day on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination at the HDIM in Warsaw, to which I warmly invite all of you.

In conclusion, I congratulate the Chairman-in-Office and the Government of Romania once more for organizing this important event and look forward to discussions that will advance the implementation of existing OSCE commitments.

Thank you.