



## **Report**

**Fact-Finding Meeting:  
Hate-Motivated Incidents Targeting Migrants, Refugees and Asylum-Seekers  
in the OSCE Region**

**Warsaw, 11 December 2015**

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## Background

Since the summer 2015, the OSCE region has witnessed an increase in people seeking refuge and/or asylum. The crisis has affected a number of participating States putting pressure on their infrastructures. Additionally, public and political discourses in some participating States presented immigration as a political, social and security problem that needed to be addressed.

ODIHR's annual hate crime reporting continually highlights that hate crimes go underreported. Mistrust of refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers in authorities and law enforcement officers often present an obstacle to reporting. In order to shed more light on the number of hate incidents targeting migrants and refugees that have occurred in the OSCE region during the refugee crisis, and to gather facts on the situation on the ground ODIHR organized a meeting on December 11 on hate motivated incidents targeting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. This effort was part of a wider work conducted by ODIHR and followed up on the expert panel meeting with government officials in November on "Migration crisis in the OSCE region: safeguarding the rights of asylum seekers, refugees and other persons in need".

During the meeting, twelve civil society representatives from nine OSCE participating States discussed the impact of the migration and refugee crisis in their countries. The meeting was held in the form of a roundtable. The two thematic sessions were dedicated to intolerance against Muslims and to racist and xenophobic incidents. In the final session, ODIHR summarised its methodology on hate crimes and presented its activities in support of civil society organizations, including trainings against hate crimes.

## First session: Hate-motivated incidents and intolerance against Muslims

During this session, participants were asked to describe how migrants, refugees and asylum seekers were presented in public discourse in their countries (e.g. "they are economic migrants, terrorists, they are different from us"), the typical experiences collected at the grassroots level, and episodes of intolerance based on anti-Muslims bias.

Intolerance against Muslims in **Croatia** was not assessed as a huge problem due to the fact that Muslims comprise two per cent of the population. The representative of the Croatian Helsinki Committee informed ODIHR that migrants and refugees do not experience discrimination and intolerance, as long as they transit via the country. Nevertheless, when the Helsinki Committee invited refugees and migrants to settle down in Croatia, it was strongly criticized by the government. It was noted that politicians often use hate speech against migrants.

In **Greece**, intolerance against Muslims was an issue before the refugee crisis. For example, the Greek Helsinki Monitor reported that vandalism and attacks against the Turkish minority were already a problem. In 2014, the Greek Helsinki Monitor registered 81 hate crimes, of which 46 were committed against migrants and refugees. Furthermore, 21 out of the 81 registered crimes with a bias motive were perpetrated by police officers. The majority of hate crimes are not reported. Currently, there are reports of bias-motivated incidents but most are not reported to law enforcement.

The civil society representatives from the Hungarian organizations MIGSZOL, Let's help the refugees together, and the Mahatma Gandhi Foundation, noted that in **Hungary** a new amendment to the Constitution specifies the Christian character of the nation. She noted that the government and the media have built a campaign, which focuses on differences between Christians and Muslims. In April 2015 there was an anti-immigrant billboard campaign sponsored by the government. Stereotypes like "Islam is an aggressive religion", "Muslims are terrorists", "Muslims people come to convert our country to Islam and our daughters will all wear a hijab" are repeatedly used to portray Muslims. Additionally, Hungarian Muslims citizens face intolerance and discrimination. For example, a participant informed that citizens identified as Muslims are frequently asked by law enforcement to show their identity documents on the basis of their racial and/or ethnic appearance. People are also attacked if they are perceived to be Muslim and every Muslim person becomes a "legitimate" target for attacks. Additionally, negative presentation of refugees has a negative effect on other minorities in the country. There were reported cases of attacks on human rights defenders while they were working with asylum seekers.

A participant also reported that there was a fight between police and asylum seekers at Roszke at the Hungarian Serbian border before the border was closed.

It was noted that the average Hungarian citizen has no real contact with refugees and is fed biased information. A civil society representative told ODIHR that refugees and migrants were left at the railway station for days in dire conditions while volunteers and civil society representatives experienced strong criticism claiming that they help terrorists and criminals.

Representatives from ICS Ufficio Rifugiati ONLUS **Italy** pointed out that the language used by politicians sustains an intolerant and racist behavior. In particular, the Lega Nord party often refers to the refugees as "economic migrants" that come to Italy "to steal jobs and money" and as "terrorists that will convert the country and commit crimes".

The participants from Afryka Connect, Access approved and Ocalenie Foundation reported that the anti-migrants and anti-refugee rhetoric in **Poland** has been very strong, including during the election campaign. The public discourse described refugees as those who "will convert Poland and bring diseases" while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also declared that "they should go back fighting in their own country." The participants also reported an incident against a UK Sikh citizen, who while on holidays in Krakow was targeted for his perceived affiliation with Islam and attacked outside a nightclub.

Participants and the representative from APC, Serbia, assessed positively the situation in **Serbia** and in the Balkans without incidents partially because it was only a transit country. They noted that migrants and refugees were mainly welcomed as domicile inhabitants associated the individuals with a refugee crisis during the war in former Yugoslavia. The government and the media publicly called for donations and for the creation of a network of volunteers. While there were some protests opposing the refugees, the participation rate to such events was low.

A participant from Equity, **Slovakia** noted that the public discourse in his country is full of racist rhetoric. The traditional media construction is: "80 per cent of the people coming to Europe are aggressive men; they want to exploit our women and our system". Politicians talk about an "invasion", but only 15 people have sought asylum in recent months. Instances of hate speech were increasing, and the consequences of the spreading of such racist messages through the internet are not being investigated. He recalled the case of an individual who posted on a social network an incitement

to violence against a Muslim family when an individual stated that he would cut them into pieces. The police dismissed the complaint made by the family and did not arrested the individual on the grounds that he was not likely to really cut them into pieces.

## **Second session: Hate-motivated incidents, Intolerance, Racism and Xenophobia**

In the second session participants were asked to share experiences they heard from migrants and refugees, and to talk into more detail about the situation in their countries regarding racism and xenophobia.

Even though **Bulgaria** was not directly represented at the meeting, civil society representatives reported that refugees transiting Bulgaria spoke about police abuse (e.g. police dogs were released at them), mistreatment and harassment during detention (e.g. not allowed to access fresh air), extortion and confiscation of money and other valuables. A refugee that was met by a volunteer in Hungary was shocked by his experience and refused to be sent back to Bulgaria.

The participant from **Greece** informed ODIHR that the government approved a new law against racism, according to which somebody can be detained only once it is proved that the person poses a threat to security and to a specific individual.

A participant reported the results of a social research on racism conducted in **Hungary**. The research has shown that the level of xenophobia in the country has not increased much during the recent months, because it was already at a very high level. The civil society representative noted that there were more migrants in detention than in reception facilities. Participants reported that refugees were afraid of authorities and police, who were not trained to deal with vulnerable and traumatized people. Women who have experienced abuses do not report to the police. At the same time, there have been cases when police officers stole valuables and blackmailed refugees to bribe them to be able to leave or enter reception centers. Cases of attacks at the detention centers were also noted. Unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable: sometimes they register as adults in order to avoid being taken to special centers for minors. Many children detained in special centers have disappeared but there are no exact figures. Civil society representatives noted that children are easy targets for human trafficking.

A participant reported additional instances of racist hate crimes. For example, a Nigerian boy was attacked in school, and a Cuban man whose girlfriend is Hungarian, was attacked by the police. Also, Roma citizens of Hungary look similar to many of the migrant groups and face additional threats. Finally, civil society activists and volunteers are also often subject to physical attacks and threats and blamed for helping the “terrorists” rather than the “Hungarians”.

The participants from **Poland** reported an incident that occurred to an Indian couple that was verbally abused by citizens who thought they were Muslims. They also reported on discriminatory practices put in place by the police in Bialystok that checks out identity documents on a racial basis.

## **Afternoon session:**

During the afternoon session, ODIHR introduced its programs to support civil society organizations.

In particular, the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department distributed its publications and introduced the civil society training on hate crimes.

The Human Rights Department also briefly described the instruments that they have developed in support of civil society, e.g. the guide on human rights defenders, and the activities that they have carried out in monitoring the refugee crisis.

Finally, the participants recommended ODIHR conduct the below-mentioned follow-up activities:

1. Help find financing opportunities (the EC and USAID bids were distributed after the conference);
2. Train civil society organizations with special modules on: addressing hate crimes, preserving the culture of volunteering; how to best deal with unaccompanied minors; media monitoring for hate speech; how hate crimes disproportionately affect men and women;
3. Support NGOs working with migrants and refugees in the context of the crisis to build relations with NHRIs;
4. Help achieve some recognition of the work of civil society groups and volunteers who are tirelessly filling in the gaps of originally state functions and therefore have contributed to the prevention of further humanitarian disasters;
5. Train border guards on dealing with vulnerable people;
6. Consider proposing to the PR on Racism and Xenophobia a visit to Hungary or to other countries concerned;
7. Address intolerant discourse in the media: ODIHR has already developed a project proposal on the issue.

## Annex 1 – Agenda



### Fact-Finding Meeting

#### Hate-Motivated Incidents Targeting Migrants, Refugees and Asylum-seekers in the OSCE region

Helsinki Meeting room, Warsaw, Poland

**11 December 2015**

- 09.00 – 09.15**                    **Welcoming Remarks and Introduction**
- Azra Junuzovic, Deputy Head, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department, OSCE/ODIHR*
- 09.15 – 09.30**                    **Introduction of participants**
- Tour de table*
- 09.30 – 11.00**                    **Session I: Hate-Motivated Incidents and Intolerance against Muslims**
- Discussion on the themes and dimensions of the problem
- Moderator: Marouane Mohammed, Advisor for Combating Intolerance against Muslims, OSCE/ODIHR*
- 11.00 – 11.15**                    **Coffee break**
- 11.15 – 13.00**                    **Session I: (continued) Hate-Motivated Incidents, Intolerance, Racism and Xenophobia**
- Discussion on the themes and dimensions of the problem
- Moderator: Larry Olomofe, Advisor for Combating Racism and Xenophobia/Training Co-ordinator, OSCE/ODIHR*
- 13.00 – 14.00**                    **Lunch**
- 14.00 – 15.30**                    **Session II: Summary of Key Points, Next Steps and Recommendations**
- Moderator: Azra Junuzovic, Deputy Head, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department, OSCE/ODIHR*
- 15.30 – 16.45**                    **Follow-up**
- Moderator: Larry Olomofe, Advisor for Combatting Racism and Xenophobia/Training Co-ordinator, OSCE/ODIHR*
- 16.45 – 17.00**                    **Closing**
- Azra Junuzovic, Deputy Head, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department, OSCE/ODIHR*

Coffee, light refreshments and water will be provided throughout the meeting