

ENGLISH only

OSCE High-level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination
Session 4
Paul Wille
Vice President of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me this wonderful opportunity to talk to you.

Tolerance in its religious, cultural and political meaning is a very grateful subject to be dealt with. The importance of tolerance and its impact on stability can never be underestimated. If tolerance is fundamentally anchored in the relations between civilians and between civilian and its leading figures, harmony is just around the corner.

Day-to-day respect and understanding among people of different faiths, political views and cultural habits can lead to long lasting stability on the local and international level. It gives me great pleasure to accentuate its relevance at this high level meeting.

The very tangible proof of its relevance is sadly enough the visible result of utter absence of tolerance. History is full of conflicts as a result of IN-tolerance. Bloodshed between people of different faiths remains omnipresent. Recent history shows too many examples of mass crime and genocide in which the participants have claimed political motives, or have misused their so called religious identity and faith to justify the most appalling atrocities. Underlying intolerance or greed were mostly the real motivates of aggressors.

In times of financial and structural fall back, ethnical, religious, homosexual and political minorities are more exposed and more vulnerable to the frustrations that live in the civil society. Colorism, racism, sexism, and all other forms of discrimination tend to grow stronger and leach on negativity to be found in the public atmosphere, hit hard by the crisis. An increase in openly-expressed hostility to minorities, and thus increasing numbers of hate crimes are reported. These minorities can feel fearful and should be given a clear, firm and credible defensive signal by their government on legislative, executive and legal level.

Religious, political and cultural tolerance can NOT only be the subject of intellectual academic or political society debates. It's an attitude that should be pursued and stimulated in everyday civil life. A form of enlightenment that requires the very best positive approach of each human being. Therefore it requires the setting, oxygen generated by a responsible and moral stable state, which incorporates human rights in its legislation, it's execution, and a trustworthy court system that ensures the rule of law, and international commitments.

ODIHR and Council of Europe reports about hate crimes in its member states show alternating positive and negative signals. Sadly enough the general conclusion is a gap between international commitments, and the results on the ground.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentleman,

I am convinced that one can determine the degree of civilization of states by looking at how it treats its weakest minorities. As a former vice president of the Council of Europe I can only emphasize that the stability of societies is directly influenced by how free and fair minorities with different views move through day-to-day life. This freedom implicates protection against hate crimes as a BASIC condition. Only then tolerance can grow and hold foot against discrimination, xenophobia and other illnesses of society.

Together with this protection, freedom of expression is unmistakable another essential element cultivating tolerance. It is a wonderful thing. It facilitates open discussion between groups sharing different views. Between minorities and majorities. It exterminates apathy and creates involvement. It also allows people to speak up against anyone who tries to force them to live otherwise and enables them to gain support on all different levels of society. Thus it helps minorities to live their life as best they can.

Without that right to criticize, societies run the risk of losing themselves to tyranny, and individuals risk becoming ostracized from the rest of their community (or worse) over otherwise trivial disputes.

With this freedom, however, comes the need to demonstrate mutual tolerance and respect. Tolerance isn't a one way high way. More specifically, freedom of expression requires that we tolerate others when they say something offensive. It is the small price we each must pay for ensuring our own unpopular or offensive ideas and beliefs are tolerated by those who disagree with them. A difficult exercise. Each and every day again. But essential for human freedom, and thus the happiness we all achieve.