

Address by Nils Muiznieks,
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Republic of Latvia
to the OSCE Conference
on Tolerance and the Fights against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination
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[Check against delivery]

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express the gratification of the government of Latvia that the OSCE has kept the issue of combating racism, intolerance, anti-Semitism and discrimination at the top of its agenda over the last year. These issues certainly deserve our attention everywhere in the OSCE region and they are receiving priority attention in Latvia. I would like to inform you of some recent developments in Latvia.

Just two-and-a-half weeks ago, on August 25, the government adopted a National Programme for the Promotion of Tolerance and allocated funds to begin immediate implementation. This policy document was drafted in view of the recommendations of the World Conference against Racism and similar gatherings held under the auspices of regional organisations, as well as the experience of other countries with similar action plans, such as Ireland, Sweden and Norway.

Latvia prides itself on being a diverse, tolerant society with few extremists. Latvia has a long tradition of peaceful co-existence and intermingling between ethnic Latvians, Russians, Poles, Jews, Roma and others. Thus, many questioned the need for such a policy document. Skeptics pointed to the European Values Survey, in which Latvia looks very tolerant in comparison to many other countries. Skeptics also pointed to data from our National Human Rights Office, which has registered no racially motivated attacks and very few complaints about discrimination on the basis of skin colour, ethnicity, religious affiliation, language and other grounds.

However, new research suggests that many people who belong to visually distinct minorities (e.g. people of African, Middle Eastern or Asian origin) have experienced physical threats or violence. Moreover, surveys suggest not only widespread prejudice towards Roma, but a deterioration in attitudes towards Muslims, even though their number in Latvia is very small. Given Latvia's history of Soviet occupation and mass migration, attitudes towards potential new immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees continue to be very negative.

Thus, the programme is meant to address not only existing forms of intolerance, such as anti-Semitism, anti-Roma sentiment, Russophobia, Russian chauvinism, etc., but also to prevent or limit the emergence and consolidation of new forms of intolerance such as Islamophobia, anti-refugee sentiment and more. The programme consists of a package of activities in education, information, public awareness raising, research and monitoring, work with NGOs and the media, as well as strengthening Latvia's anti-discrimination legislation. The process of drafting the programme was inclusive: the working group included not only civil servants, but

also researchers, human rights activists, as well as representatives of minorities. A broad-reaching consultation with society took place, as well as an active soliciting of feedback via the internet.

In parallel with the development of the National Programme to Promote Tolerance, Latvia has become more active in Holocaust education and research. On June 9 of this year Latvia became a member of the International Task Force initiated by Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson in 1998. As of 2005, the Latvian government will contribute the annual membership fee of USD 25,000.

A number of projects related to Holocaust education and support for the Jewish community in Latvia have been implemented recently. In Liepaja over the summer there was not only a history teacher training seminar on the Holocaust, but also the unveiling of a new monument, funded by a private donor, with all the names of Liepaja Jews killed during both the Nazi and Soviet occupations. A cooperative project between the Latvian Ministry of Education, the American Embassy and Iowa University will create new teaching materials on the Holocaust for primary and secondary schools in 2005. The history of the Jewish community in Latvia is more than its tragic pages and it is important to raise public awareness about all aspects of Jewish life. Thus, early in the summer, with the support of the Foreign Ministry and other partners, a new home-page on the Jewish community was launched (www.jews.lv and www.ebreji.lv).

A strong boost to public awareness in Latvia about the importance of combating discrimination will take place at the end of this month, when Latvia will host a 2-day conference "For Diversity – Against Discrimination" organised by the European Commission. The conference and 8 parallel events will provide national working groups from 25 EU countries a unique opportunity to exchange best practices, share tactics on raising public awareness, training law enforcement officials, enlisting media as allies, and cooperating with NGOs.

Although this an OSCE event, I thought it important to mention initiatives launched under the auspices of other international or regional organizations as well. Indeed, it is important to avoid the two extremes – competition between organizations on the one hand, or duplication of efforts, on the other. There is plenty of work for all organisations in combating hate and I think the OSCE has played an important role over the last year.
