

# Human Rights Without Frontiers

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## OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination

Vienna, 4-5 September 2003

### Turkey's Denial Campaign

It is a truism that education is the founding component of tolerance and non-discrimination. While schools are not the only source of tolerance education since media and the civil society play a key role as well, they provide the best environment for teaching mutual understanding and for eradicating biases and prejudices. No legislative and institutional mechanisms will be effective enough to stem acts of racism, xenophobia and discrimination, if young people are not educated into a culture of respect for human rights and pluralism.

When talking about education as a means of promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, the teaching of history comes immediately to the fore. Depending on the approach adopted within each particular education system, history teaching can become either an instrument of knowledge and dialogue between countries or, adversely, a tool of breeding prejudices. As such, history is a delicate and contentious subject.

The final report of the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Promoting Tolerance and Discrimination held in Vienna on 18-19 June 2001 reads: "The teaching of history should be a tool to promote tolerance and to **preserve the memory of historical wrongs**". The report also refers to the Council of Europe declaration "Education for Democratic Citizenship", which "indicates strategies for learning positive attitudes towards tolerance, respect for diversity and **acceptance of responsibility**".

The recommendations of human dimension meetings are not binding on the OSCE participating States. On the other side, the OSCE has a strong reputation for norm-setting and for formulating collective expectations as to the behaviour of states.

The organisers of OSCE conferences as this one invite participants to bring forward examples of good practices that may set the basis for further initiatives. Undoubtedly, there are many positive examples to be discussed and emulated. However, there are certain practices that would rather have a negative effect in the context of some controversial and sensitive history issues. In its resolution on Turkey's progress towards EU accession, the European Parliament has stated its concern with regard to "recent directives of the Turkish Ministry of Education demanding that primary and secondary schools in the country take part in a denial campaign

concerning the oppression of minorities during Turkish history, in particular in relation to the Armenian community” (paragraph 38, A5-0160/2003). Further, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* received reports that punishments were imposed on teachers who asked for clarification as regards this directive.

In 2001, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers adopted the first recommendation on history teaching in the twenty-first century Europe. It highlights a number of objectives for history teaching, like encouraging tolerance, mutual understanding, and preventing crimes against humanity. The recommendation also warns against misuses of history, such as falsifications or distortions of the past for propaganda purposes, abuses of historical record or **the denial or omission of historical facts.**

History is replete with controversial and sensitive issues but it is important to teach about these issues. Otherwise, the controversial issues will increase and can engender xenophobia, racism, and discrimination. If such issues are approached objectively, history teaching can in itself help young people develop respect for historical facts as well as critical thinking skills and compassion for others, which will subsequently lay the ground for their sense of tolerance.