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DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS
DIRECTORATE OF MONITORING
THE DIRECTOR, MR CHRISTOS GIAKOUMOPOULOS



OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance
and Discrimination against Muslims
Cordoba, 9 – 10 October 2007

Session 5

Mr Chairman,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first to thank the Spanish Chairmanship of the OSCE for hosting this important Conference and for associating the Council of Europe.

Protection of human rights, respect for the rule of law and fostering democracy are the key missions of the Council of Europe. In this context, the fight against any form of racism and intolerance is one of the priorities of its 47 Member States. Even before the 9/11 events the Council of Europe's Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) found that signs of religious intolerance towards Islam and Muslim communities were increasing in its Member States, and that Islam is often portrayed on the basis of hostile stereotypes that tend to present this religion as a threat. ECRI adopted a General Recommendation on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in March 2000. The contents of this Recommendation remain valid and – I would say – seem even more pertinent today.

Addressing islamophobia is more than timely. It is both urgent and particularly challenging as neither the post 9/11 climate, nor previous experience can be of any major help. This is why we, in the Council of Europe, believe that efforts to combat islamophobia should be coordinated and based on intensive dialogue and consultation as well as benefit from a large political visibility.

Coordination requires comprehensive strategies from both States and international organisations.

As a first step, consolidation and where necessary strengthening of international norms of different international organisations into a complete and cohesive set of rules is needed. This needs to be followed by a review of national legislation and practices dealing with discrimination, intolerance and hate speech against Islam and Muslims as against any religion and religious community. In parallel, and most importantly, this should be followed by the monitoring of the concrete implementation of these rules both at a national and international level. ECRI, as well as the newly born FRA (Fundamental Rights Agency - who has however important experience in xenophobic phenomena thanks to its EUMC history) and

OSCE ODIHR have major roles to play in this respect (and a heavy responsibility for coordination).

Concertation means that action taken in this field should involve all interested parties including States, International Organisations, Religious Communities and Civil Society.

The Council of Europe Member States share the conviction that cultural diversity and social cohesion can be successfully reconciled on the basis of common values such as human dignity, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, that are, together with other freedoms enshrined in the ECHR (European Convention of Human Rights), cornerstones of every democratic society. Religious communities can and must make substantial contributions to intercultural dialogue. They share indeed the responsibility for promoting mutual knowledge and understanding. The Council of Europe will soon publish a "White Paper", which will set out the conceptual bases and perspectives of intercultural dialogue – including, its interreligious dimension. Not only do we wish to share and discuss these perspectives with our partner international organisations (EU, OSCE and UN) but we expect the religious communities to be actively involved and contribute to the concept and the realisation of the religious dimension of this Dialogue, on the basis of "respect for the religion of others".

Action to counter islamophobia should benefit from increased political visibility. Islamophobia must be stigmatised as a behaviour that threatens the very essence of democracy. This is the only way to out-balance social prejudice, irresponsible journalism and political discourse. Inclusive and tolerant alternatives to fear, ignorance and stereotypes that poison the lives of both Muslims and non-Muslims in our societies needs to be highlighted. This Conference is an excellent example of such political visibility and the Chairman in office should be commended for this initiative.

Mr Chairman, countering islamophobia is not a mere option but a necessity in today's multicultural society. The Council of Europe considers any action in this regard as part of its longstanding action aiming at protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, fostering democracy and respect for the Rule of Law. We feel that our organisation's experience and instruments - be they of normative nature or institutions with monitoring competencies - can be instrumental for this important and difficult challenge.

10 October 2007