

High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Astana, 29-30 June 2010

Plenary Session 6: Addressing public manifestations of intolerance, in accordance with the OSCE commitments and promoting understanding through open dialogue in the media, including the Internet

Introductory remarks by Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would like to welcome all of you, the OSCE Ambassadors, members of permanent delegations and civil society representatives, to the sixth session.

Please allow me to thank the organizers and the Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship for having proposed and implemented this high-level conference on tolerance and non-discrimination. This issue requires constant attention and needs intense dialogue if we indeed want to deconstruct negative stereotypes, reduce prejudice and move closer to each other in our understanding of our different cultures, backgrounds, religions and beliefs.

Before giving the floor to the speaker of the session, Dainius Radzevičius, I would like to outline my position and make a few remarks about the topic of this session.

As the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and a citizen of one of the South East European states, I am, of course, aware of the role of media in spreading intolerant speech and of their potential to shape stereotypes.

The recent history of the Balkans showed what infamous role media and journalists can play in dividing ethnic groups, families and friends.

However, you can still not ignore the fact that media is also a reflection of society, of political discourse. National (mass) media unfortunately is not always more professional than political discourse when it comes to shaping pictures and portraying the other side.

In the Balkans it was not the media that started campaigns of derogatory speech and manifestations of negative stereotypes; it was politicians and governments – political authorities who misused newspapers and state broadcasters for their political propaganda.

Given the fact that the media at that time could not be thought of as free and independent, these political authorities had a much easier task than they would have had, had they been scrutinized by strong and independent media outlets.

It should not be forgotten that in many areas of conflict journalists were among the first victims of aggressive and, in every sense, destructive authoritarian regimes. Unfortunately, this is still the case in many of today's repressive countries.

Free and independent media and the protection of the fundamental right to free expression are at the very core of the development of more tolerant and more respectful societies.

Only free media and independent journalists can be credible and powerful vehicles for conveying messages of truth, trust and tolerance.

Any fight **against** intolerance must include the fight **for** the right to freedom of expression. If these two are separated, we will not move anywhere – if we are lucky! We could as well fall into a situation which we saw during the break-up of my own country.

I therefore welcome statements made by several participants and delegations here who stressed that any recommended measures to specifically address hate on the Internet should be assessed carefully against their possible impact on freedom of expression.

I also welcome that there seems to be a growing trend in a number of countries to view access to the Internet as an individual right, closely linked to freedom of expression; thus, any undue restriction on such access will be seen as a violation of this right.

One must also assess the value and consequence of suppressing harmful content on the Internet, perceived or actual, and be cautious about such content moving underground, making it more difficult for law enforcement agencies to track and monitor this content.

A common, holistic approach is needed to combat hate crimes and address hate speech that might lead to hate crimes. Neither individual States, nor intergovernmental organizations can tackle this issue successfully without close co-operation with other actors, particularly civil society, media, but also the Internet industry, if we talk about Internet content.

Any hate crimes and criminal incitement to violence on the Internet should be fully investigated and prosecuted under existing legislation, while guaranteeing a due judicial procedure, including appropriate legal appeal mechanisms.

Combating negative stereotypes is best achieved through education and training, through counter-speech and dialogue that aims at increasing mutual understanding. Education, in general and on the Internet in particular, should be a priority.

It is also very likely to be the most suitable means to counter hate speech or other offensive content on the Internet and to build tolerance in all fields.

A critical and literate individual is less likely to fall for intolerant ideologies. Education and media literacy not only help to understand symptoms of hate speech, but also directly fight the roots of hatred by building tolerance. It should not be forgotten that the Internet offers a unique basis for understanding. This educative potential of the Internet has not yet been fully explored and needs more attention.

Finally, the media should be encouraged to develop **voluntary** codes of conduct and **voluntary** self-regulatory mechanisms. These efforts need to come from media themselves, if they want to be first, credible, second, fast and efficient and third, more professional.

Hate crimes should be fought with the full vigour of the law, but controversial words are best fought with more and more factual, reasonable speech.

Thank you very much. Let me now give the floor to Dainius Radzevičius.