

**MUSLIM DENOMINATION IN BULGARIA
(Office of the Grand Mufti)**

ENGLISH only

Policies and strategies to further promote tolerance and non-discrimination

Vienna, 15 April 2016

SESSION II: Education and Awareness-Raising to Prevent Intolerance and Discrimination,
including Hate Crimes, Hate Speech and Hate on the Internet

SESSION III: Responses to Intolerance and Discrimination, including Hate Crimes, Hate Speech
and Hate on the Internet: Tools and Policies

Dear moderator

Excellences

Distinguished guests,

I would like to speak briefly on behalf of Muslim community in Bulgaria. I would like to express my gratitude to ODIHR for this opportunity.

Talking about strategies for tolerance and non-discrimination, in my view, the first step in addressing non-tolerance and discrimination is to acknowledge the gravity of the problem.

The concept of human rights is based on a common recognition of the importance of fair treatment for all and the belief that people should be able to live free of violence, discrimination and abuse.

The fear of difference and its unknown potential has always had a corrosive effect on community relations. The threat of terrorism has been accompanied by a rising tide of suspicion and intolerance directed at Muslim communities. Indeed, in some pockets of public opinion there is a virulent strain of anti-Muslim prejudice fuelled by the erroneous belief that all Muslims are, by their faith, terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Such prejudices and stereotypes must be dispelled.

Once we have acknowledged the problems, we start talking about how to fix them. Discriminatory and non-tolerant attitudes are often deeply embedded and hard to shake. Overcoming prejudice requires education, community engagement and dialogue, leadership and, laws and policies which reflect – and promote – the principle of non-discrimination.

When we talk about strategies to address discrimination, we must talk about education. It must be the essential central plank to every strategy. The assumption that all we are inherently fair is dangerous. The way we treat others reflects the way we have been taught to treat others. Misinformation and ignorance are the staple ingredients of stereotypes and prejudices.

Another steps in addressing discrimination and non-tolerance are political will and legislative action. In the current climate of fear and insecurity, political and community leaders have a vital role to play in speaking out against discrimination, non-tolerance and promoting the principles of multiculturalism and social inclusion. Positive public statements can be extraordinarily powerful and send a vital symbolic message to the community that non-tolerance and discrimination is never acceptable.

All these strategies need to be directed to two audiences: the discriminators and those suffering the discrimination. The strategies need to be tailored to suit each group.

However, public statements, education and engagement in some circumstance are not enough. Sometimes people need legal protection from discrimination.

To foster a human rights culture we need education, political and community leadership and legislative action. The final ingredient is community engagement. We need to engage – through education, through political debate, through community dialogue – in a national conversation about protecting human rights.

The harsh reality is that despite Bulgaria's image of itself as a fair and tolerant society, discriminatory non-tolerant attitudes still infect public attitudes media and policies.

The ban on the headscarf in some of the schools is also discrimination, although the legislation doesn't ban wearing the headscarf. Recently the director of a school in the village of Valkosel forbade a student to enter the school with headscarf. The director independently changed some articles of the school regulation, so put ban on headscarf. The director expelled her from school and suggested to be transferred to a religious school against her will. This deprived of education the student. The Ministry of Education made statement that support the school director and said that the headscarves must be banned. The manner of dress should not be an obstacle to education. Ultimately the issue gets to the court. Such a ban is a clear discrimination and forcible change of their democratic choice. We presume it would also pave the way for other bans on other religious freedoms.

This example shows us that in some instances, according to some people, the education went bankrupt - it cannot be a tool to prevent intolerance and discrimination; furthermore it's a tool for discrimination.

Notwithstanding, I would like to highlight that the education must be the essential to the strategies and policies to promote tolerance and discrimination. Misinformation and ignorance are the staple ingredients of stereotypes and prejudices.

My recommendations are that the core responses to the issue must be education, political will and adequate legislative action. Political and community leaders have a vital role to play in speaking out against discrimination, non-tolerance and promoting the principles of diversity and peaceful co-existence. To build better relationships between communities and law enforcement agencies; and to educate communities members about the legal remedies for discrimination are very important. Also the launching public awareness activities disassociating terrorism and violent extremism with Muslims and Islam would be useful.

Responsible politicians, both of the government and of the opposition, must underline the importance of correct and unbiased discourse and should also refrain from hate speech and other manifestations of extremism and discrimination. A message of encouraging tolerance, non-discrimination, understanding and respect for all must be voiced. The media can play a very positive role in promoting inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony. This is what is expected from responsible journalism. On the other hand, the media may also play a very negative and divisive role in projecting wrong and inaccurate messages. Therefore, with due respect to the freedom of expression, governments can assist or encourage creation of self-regulatory media bodies to deal with manifestations of discrimination and racism.