



**Statement by the OSCE Office for Democratic  
Institutions and Human Rights**

**Plenary Session 6: Addressing racist, xenophobic and  
discriminatory public discourse spread through, inter alia, the  
media, Internet, satellite TV and textbooks, while respecting  
freedom of expression**

**OSCE Conference on Combating Discrimination and  
Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding**

**Bucharest, 08 June 2007**

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent discussions and debates, there is has increasingly been a perceived divide between those who believe that freedom of the press is absolute, and those who would believe that this freedom should be exercised responsibly. These positions however, should not be regarded as mutually exclusive but inter-dependent parts of a good and free society in which each individual is respected.

A free society allows ideas, even those it finds insulting or shocking to be expressed. This also includes ideas about religion, about the political system and social structure. This can be extremely challenging for some people but it is only by demonstrating the falsity of those ideas that the argument is won, not by sealing the mouths of those who speak.

A historical example: In Europe in the seventeenth century, the Catholic Church taught that the earth was the centre of the universe; this was part of God's divine plan. Of course, in the Islamic world the circulation of the planets was known at least by the 9<sup>th</sup> century. But this idea was so shocking in Europe that in 1633, the great astronomer Galileo Galilei, was tried and convicted of heresy by the Church for his insistence on teaching that the planets revolve around the sun. He was forbidden to teach this doctrine and was placed under house arrest for the rest of his life and the Church did not allow the teaching of his ideas until the 1750's.

We take this example to illustrate how, in order for society to advance, shocking and revolutionary ideas must be allowed to flourish.

However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the significant power the media has to shape ideas especially when speaking about groups that are already vilified or vulnerable. This is why we do not believe that freedom of speech is absolute. Speech and free expression can and should be limited where it starts to incite violence or hatred of another group. So we support laws that prohibit and punish this kind of speech. But it is hard to show that mere words actually incite violence or hatred so prosecutions of these cases are quite rare.

Indeed, most discriminatory or intolerant speech does not directly incite crime, violence or hatred. Rather, it creates and reinforces stereotyped and negative images. And the targets of continuous negative stereotyping can, as a result, feel alienated from and rejected by the society in which they live.

So we see how serious this kind of speech can be. But although we condemn it, we do not seek to suppress it by legislation. We remember

that in Rwanda, as in Germany in the 1930's, it was a press that was shackled and controlled by political interests was used to whip up hatred and intolerance. A free press would have been able to sound the alarm and give space for other voices to be heard.

We do not, underestimate the need to keep working in the difficult area of intolerant and dehumanising speech. Therefore, in the ODIHR, we work positively with journalists and media groups to provide them with useful resources. This can give them information and contacts that widens their knowledge, and means that myths are dispelled and insulting language is not used.

Of course, there will always be people and media outlets which want to divide and misrepresent communities. But we can reject their ideology without gagging them; supporting an independent press, which is well-informed and unbiased helps create the kind of society we all want to live in.

The ODIHR's report on "Challenges and Responses to Hate Motivated Incidents" highlighted the strong influence of public discourse (by the media and political leaders) in exacerbating misperceptions, prejudices and biases and the use of forum such as the internet as a vehicle for internationalising and inciting violent acts of hatred. The report also noted the existence of several Neo-Nazi websites, including Red Watch which provide the personal data of members of specific communities as well as anti-racist activities, including their names, addresses and photographs along with messages inciting violence against specific persons. Such cases, are reflective of the transborder nature of hate crimes and the need for increased regional cross-border cooperation.

Recent reports by the ODIHR, UN, Council of Europe and EUMC/FRA have also expressed concern over the way in which discriminatory and hate-motivated discourse have become increasingly prevalent within mainstream political parties and leaders.

Even though there has been tendency of almost all political parties use the problem of 'problem of integration' or 'of security' as a tool to attract voters, to block laws connected to an immigration reform, or to exclude minority groups' organizations from policy-making, political actors need to be aware of the potential dangerous consequences of this type of discourse, and of their active roles in contributing positively to public perceptions and attitudes.

Such reports also noted the positive role that political representatives can play in defusing tensions within societies by speaking out against hate-motivated acts and by recognising the positive contributions that all individuals can make to a harmonious pluralistic society.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliamentary Assembly have already acknowledged the important leadership role of political leaders in providing positive discourse through the adoption of the *Charter of European Parties for a non-racist Society* at the joint meeting on 25 September 2003. In light of recent trends that indicate that such discourse is in fact on the rise, in many OSCE participating States, it would be useful and important for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to consider the value and significance in adopting its own Declaration (or signing onto the existing Charter) in order to provide an adequate and effective response to rhetoric which often serves to incite and in some cases justify manifestations of intolerance, including those of an increasingly violent nature.