

Address by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights (ODIHR)

“Racism in the OSCE Region: Old Issues, New Challenges”

Vienna, 20 March 2009, 10:00 am



Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to today's *Roundtable on Racism in the OSCE Region: Old Issues, New Challenges*.

In 1966, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 21 March as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in memory of 69 people killed at a peaceful demonstration against apartheid in Sharpeville, South Africa.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, which has become a blueprint for legislation, policies and initiatives to address racism across the globe.

However, racism in its various forms and manifestations, still presents an ongoing threat to peaceful co-existence and community cohesion in many parts of the OSCE region.

Recognizing this continuing challenge, the OSCE States have repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to fight racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance, and have tasked ODIHR to assist them.

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The current economic downturn threatens to challenge the cohesion of our societies. Our history shows that economic depression can lead to the increasing social exclusion and discrimination of particular communities. In times of crisis, migrants, minorities and other

vulnerable groups are likely to become ‘scapegoats’ for populist politicians and the media. In some countries, such “scapegoating” has already led to increased hostility and to the rise of number of violent hate crimes and incidents against minorities and migrants.

As the global economic crisis persists, there is an urgent need for politicians and other public figures to carefully consider their statements, to avoid inciting and inflaming ethnic, racial and religious tensions.

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Let me stress the importance of today’s event which provides a platform for the ODIHR, OSCE participating States and other stakeholders to better understand the current challenges related to racism and xenophobia, as well as the prejudices and stereotypes that are behind such attitudes.

Today, we should discuss how to improve our responses to this phenomenon. Today is an opportunity for all of you to highlight the challenges you face in your field of work, and to offer ideas on how we can all react more effectively.

For many years, the OSCE has been very active in its efforts to combat racism, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, as well as to provide the OSCE participating states with tools to effectively address these issues. Just to mention a few of the tools our office has developed and implemented:

- The *Law Enforcement Officer Programme on Combating Hate crimes* aims to support OSCE States in developing hate crimes training programmes for law enforcement officers, building their capacities to identify hate crimes, and to mobilize appropriate resources to assist victims and victim communities. This training programme was successfully implemented in Hungary, Spain and Croatia, while three more countries are currently implementing it.
- *Hate Crime Laws: A Practical Guide*, which was launched yesterday, provides practical advice for lawmakers, campaigners and law enforcement personnel, involved in developing or implementing hate crime legislation. Focusing exclusively on hate crime legislation, it is the first publication of its kind and has already been used by ODIHR as the basis for legislative reviews and trainings. The Guide has been translated into, inter alia, French, Russian, German, and Romanian.
- *Hate Crimes Report*: the ODIHR collects hate crime-related information from the participating States, through their National Points of Contacts – in 53 of the 56 OSCE States such Contact Points have been established so far. We also collect information on hate crimes from relevant NGOs, academic and research institutions, and the media. The compilation and analysis of this information is published in our annual Report “*Hate Crimes in the OSCE Region*”, analysing trends and providing insight into the hate crimes phenomenon.

- Our Office also collects best practices of tools, guidelines, initiatives and international standards on combating racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance and publishes all this on its *Tolerance and Non-discrimination Information System* (TANDIS).

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This roundtable was conceived under the auspices of the former Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair in Office, Mme Anastasia Crickley. I would like to acknowledge your efforts, Mme Crickley. You are today representing the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and I wish to thank you for your engagement in this event.

I also appreciate the good co-operation my Office has established with Ms. Crickley's successor, Mr. Mario Mauro, who regrettably could not be present at this roundtable today.

The ODIHR is also grateful for the excellent co-operation we share with each of our partner international organisations, and especially the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

I am glad that Mme Eva Rasmussen, ECRI's Chair, and the UN Rapporteur, Mr Muigai, are joining us here today. Our common voice will be also be expressed today in a form our joint press statement on

the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 21 March.

This opening plenary session will be followed by working groups in the afternoon, during which the participants will have the opportunity to split up in two smaller groups, aimed at identifying trends and providing their recommendations to the plenary.

The first working group will focus on victim groups, which are especially vulnerable to racist attacks: women, young people, refugees and asylum seekers. This working group aims to examine the responses of various actors -- including governments, inter-governmental bodies and civil society organizations -- and to recommend how to address this issue in a more effective way in the future.

The second group will be devoted to exploring the link between the economic crisis and the increase of hate crimes and racist attitudes in the society, targeting migrants and minorities.

I am certain that the variety of the backgrounds, professional fields and organizations we have gathered in this room will result in a fruitful and interesting discussion on these important topics.