

OSCE High-Level Conference on Combating Discrimination  
and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding,  
Follow-up to the Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism  
and Other Forms of Intolerance

- Civil Society Preparatory Meeting -  
- Bucharest, June 6, 2007 -

Address by  
Amb. Mihnea Constantinescu, State Secretary  
Government of Romania

Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to extend all of you a warm welcome on behalf of the Romanian government, and to convey our best wishes for a successful completion of this important meeting. I would like to express our appreciation to the Chairmanship in Office for the excellent thematic preparation of this event, and to thank not only the Spanish Presidency, but also to dr. Strohal, the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the representatives of the Secretariat for their close cooperation with the Romanian hosting parties. A special remark for the Romanian ambassador Liviu Bota, the head of our Permanent Mission in Viena, a real patriarch of the Romanian diplomacy.

Today's meeting will be crucial to the success of the high level conference which will take place over the next two days. The debates and final resolutions of the 2005 Cordoba Conference have clearly demonstrated that any strategies and policies meant to combat discrimination and to promote tolerance, mutual respect and understanding will yield the most efficient results only with the support of a strong coalition with civil society.

Civic activism is one of OSCE's most valuable resources, one which the member governments have an obligation to foster, support and promote.

Here in Romania, the lessons we learned throughout our country's transition to democracy have immensely contributed to the shaping of a society in which its citizens, their dignity and their rights and liberties are at the forefront of public policies. It is only on the basis of this kind of foundation that we could have embraced the values which form, today, Romania's new European and Euro-Atlantic identity.

Without a real commitment to the norms and the values of mutual respect, devoid of prejudices; without a respect for minorities; and without an honest acceptance of our past, we would not have been able to take our historic leap towards the European Union.

Reading the rather ambitious debate agenda for today, it seems we have all understood the real objective of this conference.

What I would like to underline in this introduction, however, is what we would NOT like this conference to be.

We would not like this to be a formal reunion which emphasizes only the achievements made thus far.

We would not like NGOs to use diplomatic language when we refer to actions of any authority isolating individuals based on ethnic, racial or religious prejudice and preventing their free access to education, labor and expression.

We do not wish to hide the fact that all across Europe there are new trends of extremism which moonlights under a populist, nationalistic rhetoric addressed to youth or impoverished communities. Political persons investing in anti-Semitic ideas, revive hate and dark pages of Europe's tragic history.

We also do not wish to hide the acceptance some clerics show towards new kinds of populism or intolerance.

We do not want to encourage evasive or subtle expressions, like the classical formula "*other forms of discrimination*" when we refer to real forms of discrimination present today, such as discrimination based on sexual orientation.

We would not like to hide the abuses still carried out in some local communities by law-enforcement persons, out of a lack of emancipation on human rights. We would not like to cover the serious crime committed within our schools when teachers choose to discriminate against Roma children.

We do not wish to conceal the injustices made by bigoted judges against certain ethnic and religious groups.

We do not want to avoid discussing about ethnic and religious cleansing within OSCE space

Most importantly, we do not wish this meeting to end in another political promise, only to be later forgotten in the drawers of the respective governmental institutions.

As civic activists, you have a huge responsibility. Your voice counts and it is the merit of the OSCE and the ODIHR, to offer you this forum so that your assessments and your best practices can be brought forth.

Dialogue, education, responsible political behavior and leadership, public awareness, are all necessary elements for a preventative code of conduct which we wish to see developing throughout the OSCE area.

In our countries we have institutions dedicated to the study of the tragic pages of history; we have school manuals which present the horrors of the Holocaust; we also have special programs for combating intolerance, anti-semitism and hate. I am sure that the majority of the countries represented here today have had similar experiences to ours.

Yet we consider that all these measures are not enough; and we have to consider they are not enough until we are all able to assume responsibility, each and every member of our society; until we fully commit to a common code of conduct, intolerant to intolerance, extremism and hate.

In order to succeed, we need to form strong coalitions with the respected voice of the civil society in every OSCE member country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Romanian government and all Romanian institutions are strongly committed to the fight against discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism and intolerance. By drawing on the necessary lessons and by carefully assuming the tragedies of Holocaust, we may be able to determine how to best respond to any form of discrimination and intolerance.

At the same time, we have the obligation to prevent any new, inventive form of revival of the darkest figures of the past. The laws which sanction and prevent such actions should be fully applied, without exceptions, in order to ensure that our political, social and cultural integrity remains untouched by any extremist tendency.

In Romania, the *National Council for Combating Discrimination*, set up in 2002, has become an autonomous agency under Parliamentary control and has been fully consolidated. The Department for Inter-ethnic relations and the National Agency for Roma have set important projects to prevent discrimination and promote inclusion. Today the Government approves the budget for full functioning of the recent established Commission to study Roma slavery. Other research and educational projects are ongoing in cooperation with NGOs.

Institutionally, new codes of conduct are currently being developed, within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration Reform, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Cults. Each of these bodies will present their progress in the upcoming sessions.

Beyond the creation of a legal framework however, no serious measure against discrimination would be successful without the strong support of a vibrant civil society. Without its vigilant eye, many serious abuses and acts of intolerance at the local community level would have remained unknown and unsanctioned.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the Romanian NGOs concerned with the protection of individual rights and with the fight against any form of intolerance.

I have the honor to mention some of these organizations, whose representatives I can see in the audience: The Media Monitoring Agency, the Center for Combating and Monitoring anti-Semitism, the Romani CRISS organization, Amare Romenza, Accept a.o. We respect not only their efforts to bring to light acts of intolerance and discrimination, but we also greatly appreciate their preventative action.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

Today's preparatory meeting offers the OSCE member countries a historic opportunity. It remains up to you that this chance be taken advantage of to the fullest extent, by coming up with clear and firm recommendations.

As governmental representative, I have to emphasize that good governance can not be ever sustainable without full respect for human dignity and human security.

This is the foundation of any democratic society, in which citizens' rights should be at the forefront of any public policy.

Today, here in Bucharest, we would like to relay to all our citizens a promise of solidarity: governments and civic society, to stand firm, so that understanding and mutual respect to prevail against all forms of intolerance and discrimination.

Thank you.