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**The role of Parliamentarians in the fight against racism, xenophobia,  
anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of intolerance**

Ladies and gentlemen, Ambassador Strohal, let me begin by thanking the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human rights for the invitation to participate in this year's edition of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. As a member of the Italian Parliament and of its Human Rights Committee I believe today's exchange of views and the meetings before and after which I have and will be able to attend (alas only a small part of the rich agenda in the days and week to come) constitute an important opportunity both for me and my colleagues back home.

It may sound redundant in this setting, but I would like to repeat my firm conviction that racism, antisemitism and xenophobia pose a genuine threat to democracy, the rule of the law and the respect for human rights -- the founding principles of our political systems.

I have been invited to speak about the positive role that Parliaments and Parliamentarians can have in the fight against racism and intolerance. First, however, I would like to remind us all that unfortunately politicians can and do contribute to the genesis of these phenomena. Members of Parliament, and politicians in general, are often part of the problem -- and, what is worse, in growing numbers, according to recent reports from Europe. This is why it is so important to make sure we have the right tools and set our priorities straight in order to be effective contributors to the solution.

Populism is a tempting political option, particularly in times of rapid change and growing uncertainties. The new threats and problems facing Europe and the world today pose a huge challenge, and it is often all too easy to propose simplistic and stereotyped solutions in response to the growing anxieties and uncertainties of our electorates. It is easier to shift the responsibility for the failure of some policies onto particular sectors of the population, arguing, perhaps, that they do not want to integrate, do not want to participate, do not want to adapt -- basically, that they want to continue to be different.

In reality, of course, "difference" is part of the history of all the OSCE member states, and of Europe as a whole. Our societies have been multicultural for decades, if not centuries. People belonging to different cultures and religions have been living together for as long as we can remember -- and every attempt to impose

homogeneity, ethnic or otherwise, has ended in tragedy. Migration -- in its two forms, immigration and emigration -- is deeply embedded in our national experiences. Yet it is easier to say that immigrants and other minority groups do not want to be integrated, rather than admit to a failure to do so effectively.

Terrorism poses another challenge, and fear of this threat has become pervasive. Responses have varied but many have come with a price: what we considered well-established rights have been sacrificed to security concerns. It is at times like this that politicians and political parties are bound, in my view, to show rigour, self-restraint and integrity. Freedom of expression should not be confused with deliberate misrepresentation. Electoral popularity cannot be sought at the cost of encouraging racism, intolerance and xenophobia.

If we do so not only do we contravene the fundamental principles of solidarity and equality, in violation of the human rights of the targets of this particularly odious form of political action and discourse, but we contribute to making the world more dangerous. Instead of fighting racism and social exclusion we generate more, and instead of improving the cohesion of our societies we create fertile ground for extremism. A dangerous, intentionally undemocratic and violent community is not, I think, what our citizens want.

Alarm bells went off across Europe with the resurgence of extremist parties propagating and defending xenophobic and racist ideologies incompatible with the standards set by both the OSCE and the other regional organisations to which many of our countries belong, the Council of Europe and the European Union. Guidelines and legal instruments were drawn up to stem the trend: their efficacy is the object of this and other sessions of this meeting.

Among the voluntary instruments which took shape was the Charter of European political parties for a non-racist society. I think it is fair to say that the Charter, though widely underwritten, has had a limited impact. In my own country, Italy, though a number of parties -- including my own, the Green party -- have undersigned the Charter, it prompted little change. Politicians of migrant origin can still be counted on the fingers of one hand in our National Assembly, and they are rarer still in local government. The fact their presence is quite exceptional leaves these elected representatives vulnerable to verbal attacks unimaginable only a few years ago -- particularly, after September 2001, those of Arab origin.

Speaking to our Human Rights Committee in the Italian Parliament at the close of a fact-finding mission last year, Doudou Diène, the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on Racism Discrimination Xenophobia and related forms of Intolerance, pointed out that in Italy, as elsewhere, a trivialization of racist and xenophobic discourse had taken place as a result of political and electoral exploitation. This shift in what is regarded as acceptable political behaviour, he

warned, together with increasingly virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric on the part of some politicians is feeding a xenophobic drift.

The main victims, he reports, are Rom and Sinti, immigrants, African asylum-seekers, East Europeans and Muslims, who suffer discrimination, including institutional discrimination, exclusion and harassment. His evaluation is confirmed by the local representatives of UNHCR.

Mr Diène called for the demonstration of a firm political will, at all levels, to combat xenophobia in Italy. He may have been struck by the fact that only five members of Parliament attended his hearing.

This, Mr Chairman, is what we are up against. This is why I believe the HDIM is putting the right questions and soliciting appropriate political action, beginning with a call for reliable data collection. It need hardly be said that inadequate data collection can hide discrimination and abuses against vulnerable groups.

As Parliamentarians we receive a number of reports, beginning, where they exist, by those presented by our national institutions. Ours, the first provided by Italy's new anti-discrimination office this year, is frankly disappointing: it includes no systematic breakdown of data.

This year the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published its first Report on Racism and Xenophobia in EU member states, primarily devoted to the implementation of the EU's Racial Equality Directive. It constitutes an up-to-date assessment of these 27 participating states' implementation of commitments which, I think, largely match those underwritten by the same countries as OSCE members. What emerges is a strikingly uneven picture, with five Southern European countries, including Italy, providing no official criminal justice data on racist crime and violence. The same countries tended to have either mild or no administrative sanctions in place in cases of racial or ethnic discrimination, whilst others (the UK in particular) have a strong and evidently dissuasive system.

Other reports are prepared and presented to Parliaments, the most complete being the country reports of the Council of Europe's Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). Then there are the reports of the UN's Special Rapporteur and the valuable, and numerous, recent initiatives within the OSCE, including the appointment of the Chairman's three Personal Representatives. My fear is that there is a risk of dispersion and overlap.

What we, as Parliamentarians, can most usefully do, I think -- besides sustaining valuable national parliamentary initiatives like the All Party Inquiry into anti-Semitism in the UK -- is to try and sustain national and international awareness of the profoundly corrosive effect of racist or intolerant attitudes on our societies. We must

press for effective sanctions and legal redress, support national action plans according to the same standards in our different countries and press for the constitution, where they do not exist, of independent institutions against all forms of discrimination. To do this we need a strong partnership with civil society and trans-national dialogue of the sort we have here today.