



Opening Statement by Ambassador Christian Strohal Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on “Education to Promote Mutual Respect and Understanding and to Teach about the Holocaust”

Dubrovnik, 23 October 2006

Minister, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, and
Colleagues

It is a great pleasure to be here with you all to the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on “Education to Promote Mutual Respect and Understanding and to Teach about the Holocaust”. This is the second Tolerance Implementation Meeting and I would like to use the opportunity to thank the OSCE Chairmanship and the Croatian Government for organizing this important Meeting which will be used to advance the implementation of important OSCE commitments.

It is significant that this meeting takes place in Dubrovnik, a city with an immensely rich historical and cultural past as well as a city, located in a region of the world where the recent past demonstrates how acts of intolerance, when taken to an extreme, undermine the stability and security of an entire region.

With this meeting, the OSCE draws attention to the crucial role of education for societies that seek to protect and develop their pluralism in face of various threats. Manifestations of intolerance, intercultural conflict, fear and hatred of “the other” are on the rise throughout the OSCE region, involving violence and discourse, as well as clashes between and within communities. Apart from the internet and media, our city centres and suburbs, and, most importantly, public places such as schools have recently become sites of offensive discourse, exclusion and even violence.

In some cases, schools have reflected the broader trends of intolerance, lack of trust and respect in a society, they also have the potential to change such trends. It is in schools that young people from different backgrounds meet and work together and have the opportunity to establish not only mutual respect and understanding of difference but also an appreciation and value for diversity.

Education is only one out of many ways of tackling the disconcerting development of intolerance, hate and discrimination. Between 2003 and 2006, the OSCE has held several conferences, which were followed up by specific Decisions of the OSCE Ministerial Council. These Decisions committed all 56 OSCE states to undertake specific actions to combat hatred and encourage tolerance. In order to implement those commitments, participating States have drawn on various tools, as well as assistance programmes offered by the ODIHR. Among the efforts undertaken, we find strengthened legislation, improvements in the field of data collection, and special training programmes for law enforcement officers.

With the 2005 Ljubljana Ministerial Council Decision on Tolerance, participating States decided to “encourage public and private educational programmes that promote tolerance and non-discrimination” and “to consider drawing on ODIHR expertise and assistance in order to develop methods and curricula for tolerance education.” This meeting will focus on both of these aspects. It provides participants with the opportunity to review and discuss recent efforts in the field of diversity education and to identify areas where further implementation is needed. I strongly encourage you to openly share your experiences, to discuss difficulties and to also exchange your good practices in this forum of experts. The agenda and the participating speakers suggest that some promising answers will be found to the questions of which teaching methods and curricula, and which conflict prevention and mediation strategies create respect and appreciation of “the other” and a climate of inclusion and mutual trust among teachers and students.

The ODIHR continues with its efforts to build up the expertise necessary to assist participating States. We very much look forward to presenting our diversity education assessment report to you, which not only provides an overview of the diverse approaches undertaken in participating States, but which also contains recommendations as to how existing efforts could be improved. I should like to note the comprehensive nature of this report which covers not only curricula and school material, but also the strategic planning of diversity education, quality standards and evaluation, and teacher training. The report is based on the questionnaire sent out by my office and we were grateful to receive 50 responses from participating States.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank the nine experts whose knowledge and advice were indeed indispensable when working on the country reports. We hope that these recommendations together with the proposals to be put forward by the representatives of civil society, will be used by participating States who are currently implementing programmes on diversity education.

The ODIHR will hold a side-event on the assessment report today over the lunch break to which you are all invited.

The ODIHR will continue to work in this field. The Human Rights Department and Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Programme have initiated co-operation with the Council of Europe to develop a compendium that brings together the best practices in the field of diversity education. Recently during the HDIM, the ODIHR also launched our Tolerance Information System which contains a special corner on education that informs about useful practices in various States.

We hope that the information, tools and guidelines within this information system will be of use to participants of this meeting and I encourage you to submit to us, many of the good practices which will be presented over the next two days so that we can make them available to the larger public. I would also like to draw your attention to the trilingual “Website Guide to Tolerance Education” created by the Centre for European Studies, Krakow, which the ODIHR supports. This guide addresses students, teachers, NGO workers and all other stakeholders involved in education and its emphasis is on the facilitation of exchange about activities in the field of diversity education.

The Ljubljana Ministerial Council Decision explicitly includes education on the Holocaust and on anti-Semitism as areas of diversity education. The OSCE participating States’ strong commitment to the combat of anti-Semitism and to the memory of the Holocaust, which is also reflected in the Berlin Declaration, stands behind the special efforts undertaken by my office in this field.

The very successful suggestions for educators on Holocaust memorial days that were developed in a cooperation project between the ODIHR and Yad Vashem will be presented by one of the Yad Vashem experts. Also adopted by the UN this project is a very good example for fruitful international cooperation and implementation in the field of Holocaust Education.

It is a pleasure for us to introduce you in the course of this conference to the teaching material on anti-Semitism that the ODIHR has been developing in strong cooperation with the Anne Frank House, Amsterdam and national experts from 7 participating States. The material has as of now been adapted to seven countries, and we hope it will be implemented in all seven states. We wish to draw the attention of other participating States to this very useful tool. The three modules of this programme not only seek to establish a link between past and present forms of anti-Semitism, but they also look at anti-Semitism as one of many forms of discrimination.

I expect this conference to discover more connections like that and to focus on the cross-cutting and inter-disciplinary areas so as to ensure the mainstreaming of diversity education, as recommended by our experts.

Before concluding, therefore, I would like to welcome the participants from civil society, because I think we are all aware of the fact that education can only be as effective as society allows it to be. NGOs are undoubtedly crucial actors when it comes to fostering a climate of tolerance and mutual respect in our participating States, and I wish to thank you for your cooperation and frequent input into our activities. Our report recommends participating States to use the expertise of NGOs and to involve all stakeholders in the policy-making process aimed at creating a national, regional and local strategy for diversity education.

Finally, I would like to conclude by thanking the Government of Croatia for the long-standing co-operation that my office has had with Croatian experts not only in the field of education but also in the area of law enforcement training. Today I will sign a memorandum of agreement with the Ministry of Interior which underlines their commitment to institutionalise hate crime training within their national police training curricula and their willingness to work with other law enforcement officers from other OSCE participating States to tackle hate crime as a transborder phenomenon.

I look forward to welcoming you to the third and last Tolerance Implementation Meeting for this year which will address the hate crime data deficit. That meeting, like the one today, will undoubtedly contribute to the further implementation of OSCE commitments to combat manifestations of hate and to promote mutual respect and understanding.

Thank you.