



**Civil Society Preparatory Meeting for the
OSCE High Level Conference on Combating
Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect
and Understanding**

Bucharest, 6 June 2007

Opening Session

**Opening Remarks by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights**

Check against delivery!

State Secretary,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to attend the Civil Society Preparatory Meeting for the OSCE High Level Conference on *Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding*. This kind of meeting is becoming a crucial element in OSCE conferences: building on the successes of prior similar events where you have played a constructive role vis-à-vis States and international organizations, by making forward-looking recommendations to strengthen our collective action against Anti-Semitism, racism, discrimination and intolerance. Civil society has an indispensable role in this. We are glad that the Spanish Chairmanship shares this view and has been very supportive in this regard. We also thank the Romanian hosts for all their efforts and hospitality.

It is an honour to give you a brief outlook on our expectations. But before doing so, permit me to recall the basis for our work: commitments and their effective implementation. Since 2003, OSCE States have undertaken numerous and detailed commitments in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination. They have reiterated their determination to condemn and act upon manifestations of intolerance and to foster pluralistic and inclusive societies where diversity is not only respected but also valued. Significant progress has been made by several States through efforts to strengthen legislation, and law enforcement response, and intensify educational programmes to promote mutual respect and understanding and, in all of this and beyond, increase co-operation with civil society.

However, as your “reality check” confirms only all too often, we are witnessing an increase of violent manifestations of hatred and violations of religious freedom in a number of countries. We also see how words of intolerance can spread easily beyond borders and can have far reaching and negative consequences for individuals and communities in the whole region.

For States to live up to their commitments, they have a tremendous task to achieve. In this regard, they can rely on the support from international organizations such as the OSCE with its field operations and institutions such as the ODIHR. In addition, OSCE participating States clearly profit from the expertise of an active civil society. By working in partnership with it, States may develop joint strategies and actions in order to strengthen the response to acts of hatred and intolerance. My Office has developed many programmes and tools to assist and support the efforts of civil society, as well.

The main output of today’s discussions, we hope, is twofold: 1) develop recommendations that will be presented at the opening of the Conference tomorrow, 2) strengthen our shared network beyond the Conference. You will contribute not only to the final consultations of the main conference but your recommendations will also be used by the participating States and OSCE Institutions to shape the future priorities of the work of the OSCE in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination.

The agenda of this meeting is the result of ongoing consultations between civil society representatives and my office. It is thus reflecting your priorities and the objectives you want to achieve. This morning, the focus is set on trends related to hate crimes and manifestations of intolerance and on the role of States and civil society in providing an effective response to such manifestations. Acknowledging that communities face different forms of intolerance and may need specific answers and support, you will have the opportunity to participate in working groups according to your areas of interest.

The afternoon working groups will address cross-cutting issues where improved response by participating States and by civil society is needed. The discussions will focus on strategies to address hate-motivated public discourse, especially during electoral campaigns, the crucial issues of data collection and implementation of legislation in the area of hate crimes and the challenges faced by civil society in its efforts to combat and respond to hate crimes and other acts of intolerance.

The concluding plenary session will provide the opportunity to look into the future. The responsibility of combating Anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding lies, first and foremost, with each individual State whose primary *raison d'être* and duty is to protect the human dignity of its citizens. States, however, cannot do the job alone. They need a vital civil society and effective inter-governmental institutions to support their activities. The last session will be devoted to exploring ways to strengthen cooperation between the OSCE and civil society.

In all of this, we appreciate the role of the Personal Representatives of the Chairman-in-Office and thank them also for their active engagement in this meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a globalized world where threats are inter-connected, no single violent manifestation of intolerance can be ignored since it bears the potential of escalation far beyond the boundaries of a country. No security agenda can be successful if it does not tackle manifestations of intolerance even if they are on a so-called low-level. We must ensure that all actors involved - States, civil society and international organizations - assume their responsibilities to turn good words into good and concrete deeds.

Civil society has provided us with invaluable reminders over the years about the need for increased action in the fight against intolerance and discrimination. I count on you to keep doing so in the times ahead, and to work with us in our shared mission. In that spirit, I wish you a most productive meeting and encourage you to bring solid and ambitious recommendations and avenues for action for the OSCE to tomorrow's Conference and beyond.

Thank you.