

OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND PROMOTING
MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING
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PLENARY SESSION 6: ADDRESSING RACIST, XENOPHOBIC AND
DISCRIMINATORY PUBLIC DISCOURSE SPREAD THROUGH, INTER ALIA, THE
MEDIA, INTERNET, SATELLITE TV AND TEXTBOOKS, WHILE RESPECTING
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

AN INTRODUCTION BY
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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen;

Every time there is a meeting on combating discrimination, one cannot avoid having mixed feelings. On the one hand it gives hope to have another joint effort to tackle issues, which, if untackled, have proven to destroy peace and stability in our societies; on the other, it is difficult to avoid having a sense of disappointment, due to the fact that we needed yet another effort, without necessarily seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

Are we losing the battle against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, islamophobia, and related discrimination? Against intolerance to the “other” and related violence? Against ignorance and prejudice, which are at the root of all these? As long as we continue fighting, the answer is no. The existence of this will to keep the battle going is well documented at both national and international levels, as witnessed by many decisions, statements, legislations, policies, civil society initiatives, etc. Here I refer to the commendable work of the UN, the Council of Europe and ECRI, the EU and the former EUMC, the OSCE and the ODIHR, various national programs and good practices, and relentless efforts of many NGOs.

Yet this is exactly where we hang in balance. The political will at the individual governmental level has to be stronger and coupled with determined action to pursue the goals and win the battle. However, the current political climate in Europe is far from that. Various surveys and research indicate that public political discourse, as reported in the media, is more and more invaded by racist, xenophobic, antisemitic, islamophobe, and discriminatory elements. The reason for this is simple, but the mechanism and the ways to deal with it are complex.

Especially during election periods, addressing basic insecurities of a sensitive electorate by demonizing and blaming the “other” for certain difficulties encountered in the daily life of the society is a simple and effective method of creating a sense of togetherness and mobilize political support. It is the well known reductionist approach to the complicated problems of the modern society: populism.

Generally, the far right of the political spectrum is known to use this approach masterfully, adding a shaky ideological dimension to it. This, we have been accustomed to, are aware of its dangers, and have developed various strategies to deal with it within our democratic structures. At least we think we know how to contain it.

What is surprising and ultimately and paradoxically more sinister today is that the growing use of racist and xenophobic political discourse is not reflected in any particular electoral success for parties in the far right; it is the mainstream parties, which, apparently with the aim of stealing its thunder, appropriate this discourse traditionally associated with the far right. There is thus an almost visible “osmosis” of racist and xenophobic political discourse. The political center is shifting to the right, with an additional unexpected result: political parties, which, in turn, are traditionally associated with the fight against racism and discrimination tend more and more to remain silent at worst, and be less vocal at best. The perception seems to be that for ones, racist discourse might, for others anti-racist discourse might not, increase their chances at the polls.

Of course, government responsibility is an authoritative teacher, and once in power, the discourse used in the election campaigns is never fully reflected on policy. Unfortunately however, the process, whereby racist, xenophobic, antisemitic, islamophobe, and discriminatory discourse is banalized and is not shocking anymore, becomes mainstream, normal, and unopposed.

And this represents a great danger, for several reasons. First, the whole process obviously weakens the basis of democratic polity – which considers respect for human rights as a value on which there can be no compromise – as its ultimate guardians, the political parties, show signs of weakness.

Second, the media, another invaluable tool for the preservation of democratic values, becomes more a part of the problem and less a part of the solution. Extending from satellite TV to internet, distributing information almost at the speed of light across all frontiers, enjoying immense prerogatives to serve the public interest, media can cut both ways, and the more the political climate changes, the more the media can be expected to cut the wrong way.

Third, security related issues, such as terrorism, which are high on the agenda lead to defensive postures and contribute to the atmosphere of insecurity, promote prejudices, and feed exclusivist sentiments. The threat of terrorism is real, the perception of the threat is justifiable, but exploiting public fears in expectation of political gains remains to be a dangerous practice.

There is no magic stick to make racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, islamophobia and related discrimination disappear. The tools at our disposal are the same as ever: sanctions, education, and above all, political will.

First sanctions: they are always there, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Their scope and implementation, however, are affected by the changing political climate and the state of the public opinion. Not only the right balance must be found between freedoms and the sanctions, but also using freedoms as smokescreen to hide a lack of will to implement sanctions should be avoided.

Second, education: there is a consensus on it as the ultimately effective means of solving the problem of racism and discrimination. Education extends over time and space: it is continuous and takes a long time, and covers every segment of the society, from educating our children and youth to educating and reeducating our police, our judiciary, the media professionals, and so on. Usually its effects are felt slowly, with a time lag. Overall, it works. But the effectiveness of education policies is also closely linked to the whims of the political climate.

Third, political will itself: without it, the battle is lost. Under current circumstances, finding ways to convince governments to strengthen their will to commit themselves to fight against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, islamophobia, and related discrimination with more deeds than words becomes essential, but also presents a particular challenge. Intergovernmental organizations and civil society have to be more vigilant than ever, to make sure that political will as reflected in texts should result in actions and policies.

The accumulated wisdom emanating from the activities of both intergovernmental and civil society organizations are in fact impressive. The Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society is a commendable initiative of the EU. OSCE decisions and declarations on the subject indicate a precious sign of commitment by member governments. ECRI's Declaration on the Use of Racist, Antisemitic, and Xenophobic Elements in Political Discourse, and ECRI General Policy Recommendations, particularly Recommendation No. 3 on Combating racism and intolerance against Roma/Gypsies, No. 5 on Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, No. 6 on Combating the dissemination of racist, xenophobic, and antisemitic material via the internet, No. 7 on National legislation to combat

racism and racial discrimination, No. 8 on Combating racism while fighting terrorism, No. 9 on the Fight against anti-Semitism, and No. 10 on Combating racism and racial discrimination in and through school education, provide a sound basis for the governments to enact and implement policy. The recommendations of the Civil Society Preparatory Meeting of the present OSCE Conference on the 6th of June indicate the depth of the common effort.

The problem we face may look insurmountable at times. But as long as we continue to look for solutions, we will find solutions. Speaking of discourse, let us once again recall the memorable introductory sentence of Descartes' famous *Discourse on the Method*, knowing that racism does not make sense:

“Common sense is mankind's most equitably divided endowment...”

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen.