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Intercultural dialogue: the media's role

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Seminar on Racism, Xenophobia and the Media: Towards respect
and understanding of all religions and cultures

Vienna, 22 May 2006

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the European Commission let me welcome you to this seminar, part of a series we have sponsored to increase the media's involvement in the Euromed partnership.

Many of you were at our previous discussions on "Euromed and the Media" where we discussed issues like press freedom, gender equality, and the safety and security of journalists. I am sure this seminar will be just as productive.

I would like to take this occasion to thank you, and your colleagues who could not be here today, for your enthusiasm and dedication. Your contribution will make the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership stronger than ever.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin with the words of Abraham J. Heschel, "Racism is man's gravest threat to man – the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason".

Europeans know from bitter experience the gravity of the threat racism and xenophobia represent. Indeed, the European Union was born out of the cataclysm of intolerance that engulfed twentieth-century Europe.

Our task has been to invert Heschel's equation, minimising hatred and maximising reason. And today the European Union stands as a testimony to Europe's religious, linguistic and cultural diversity. We are a community of values, united by our diversity and our determination to prevent such a threat from overwhelming us again.

That is not to deny there are problems in Europe. Racism and xenophobia stem from fear of the unknown, of the different, and in uncertain times they are never far from the surface. That is why we have set up the Monitoring Centre and why we are continually fighting for equality and tolerance.

We must also face facts and accept that much of what prompts peoples' fears is a perception of a heightened threat from migrants. National debate in a number of EU countries is dominated by the supposed danger to jobs and security posed by migrants. At a time when the EU is profoundly aware of its obligation to respond to public concerns, migration is of necessity high on our agenda.

That is why later this week the European Commission will be discussing what we can do to address Europeans' concerns about illegal migration and trafficking, and the perceived flood of migrants to our shores. The other side of the equation is taking the necessary steps to encourage the migrants we need for Europe's continued economic development.

We also place a high priority on integrating minorities into Europe's mainstream and on preserving essential European values like tolerance, diversity and peaceful dialogue. That is reflected in our adoption of Directives on equality, action plans, EU programmes, and intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

Next month we will meet here in Vienna again to discuss criminal penalties for racist behaviour and what more we can do to combat racism and xenophobia within the EU.

Of course we are not unique in facing these problems. No society in any part of the world is immune to prejudice. Just as Europe must fight a rising tide of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, not to mention other prejudices against foreigners, migrant communities and ethnic and racial minorities, so must our partners in the Muslim world and in Israel.

Europe still struggles to overcome “the oldest hatred” on our continent: anti-Semitism. And the furore around the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammed revealed the depth of ignorance in much of Europe about what others might find offensive. It also revealed the depth of ignorance about what Europeans – of whatever religion or creed – find acceptable.

The one thing we learnt from the accusations and counter-accusations was that no country can lay claim to the moral high ground. Around the world minority groups face persecution on religious, ethnic or racial grounds. There is no hierarchy of hatreds, each is equally repugnant.

We all have work to do to fight prejudice in the media and society as a whole, whether that be anti-Semitism, islamophobia, or other forms of religious or ethnic bias.

So today let me issue a **call to action**. All parts of every society have a responsibility to act against racism and xenophobia. But the media have a particularly crucial role to play, given your power to shape societal attitudes.

Media professionals must be aware of the impact of their words and images. As a judge of the Rwanda war crimes tribunal put it, “The power of the media to create and destroy fundamental human values comes with great responsibility. Those who control such media are accountable for its consequences.”

We need you to fully engage in the fight for mutual respect and understanding. We need you to do your utmost to minimise hatred and to maximise reason. And we need you to join with us in calling for responsible and meaningful intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

At the heart of the debate over recent months has been the supposed conflict between freedom of expression and freedom of religion. This is certainly not a new debate, philosophers down the ages have struggled with it. What makes it so difficult is there is no straightforward solution.

Both freedom of expression and freedom of religion are non-negotiable. Freedom of speech is central to Europe’s values and traditions. But its preservation depends on responsible behaviour by individuals. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right of individuals and communities. It entails respect for the integrity of all religious convictions and all ways in which they are exercised.

There’s no clear cut answer on how to reconcile the two, but rather two principles which should guide us. First, it is unacceptable that any one group in society – Christian, Muslim, Jewish or secular – seek the sole right to fix the parameters. And second, respect and understanding are the keys to any acceptable outcome.

The precise contours of a solution cannot be prescribed, they must come from each individual taking responsibility for his or her own actions. By extension, we do not believe the media should be regulated from outside, but rather that you find ways to regulate yourselves. It is not for politicians, and certainly not for the European Commission, to impose a code of ethics on the media. You are the best judges of what is possible, and of where the boundaries between gratuitous provocation and legitimate debate lie.

Freedom of expression is not the freedom to insult or offend. Hate speech is always abhorrent. Yet the line is sometimes blurred. That is why you will have discussions here among yourselves as media professionals, free from the constraints of politicians' presence. Together you will decide on the best approach.

I urge you to treat this matter with the gravity it deserves and, as a profession, to rise to the challenges it poses. In considering the question of self-regulation, I would also ask you to think about the need for monitoring from within your own professional bodies. I am convinced that will have a significant impact.

I look forward to hearing about your discussions and receiving your recommendations. As with the previous seminars, these will feed into discussions on future priorities for the euro-med partnership, and so form a valuable input for our decisions on future programmes.

Before closing, let me also remind you of the EU's other work to promote tolerance and understanding in the Euromed region, which you might consider in formulating your recommendations to us.

Earlier this month I visited the Anna Lindh Foundation for dialogue between cultures, which is developing a wide range of programmes targeting young people.

Projects on popular music, school magazines and encouraging scientific and information technology exchanges across the region will bring our young people closer together and promote mutual respect and understanding.

In addition the Foundation has programmes promoting women's rights and networking female students and academics. And workshops promoting artistic creation in fields such as theatre, music, modern dance and arts, including travel grants for young artists from across the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, and I am determined that by then we will have made significant improvements in the level of mutual respect and understanding our communities have for one another.

In the months and years to come we must reach beyond the elites to the man and woman on the street. That is a vital part of the fight against racism and xenophobia. And you will be the key to achieving that. Through you, the richness of our cultures, the similarities and the differences between us can be celebrated.

You know best how you can contribute, how to marry freedom of expression with respect for others, and minimise the hatred and maximise the reason. So I look forward greatly to hearing from my colleagues your suggestions.

Thank you again for your presence here and I wish you fruitful discussions in the days ahead.