



Values threatened by hate speech must be reinforced, say Heads of European human rights institutions on International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

STRASBOURG, VIENNA and WARSAW – 20 March 2015 – The most effective way to counter hate speech is to reinforce the values of democracy and human rights that it threatens, the heads of three intergovernmental human rights institutions said today in a joint statement on the eve of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.¹

Michael Georg Link, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Christian Ahlund, Chair of the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), and Morten Kjaerum, Director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), stressed that hate speech needs to be confronted and condemned directly by counter-speech that shows its destructive and unacceptable character.

Politicians and other public figures have a particular responsibility in this regard because of their capacity to influence a wide audience, they said. In addition, education has a key role to play in undermining the misconceptions and misinformation that form the basis of hate speech.

"Hate speech is an extreme form of intolerance and contributes to hate crime. If left unaddressed, it can lead to acts of violence and conflict on a wider scale," ODIHR Director Link stressed. "Within the OSCE region, it is important for political representatives and opinion-makers such as the media, community leaders and educational institutions to show strong leadership whenever hate speech and hate crimes occur."

Aware of the grave dangers posed by hate speech for a democratic society, the heads of the three institutions said that criminal prohibition is necessary when hate speech publicly incites violence against individuals or groups of people, but is not sufficient to eradicate it.

"Raising public awareness of the importance of respecting pluralism, as well as of the dangers posed by hate speech can often be the most effective means of preventing it," ECRI's Chair Ahlund said. "In this context, national authorities should support non-governmental organisations, equality bodies and national human rights institutions working against hate speech."

Ahlund, Kjaerum and Link stressed that victims should be helped to cope with the trauma of being targets of hate speech and encouraged to report it to the authorities. At the same time, appropriate action must be taken to ensure that society understands that the use of hate speech is unacceptable.

"In the current climate, we need urgently to move away from the culture of impunity we see on internet and social media platforms," said FRA Director Kjaerum. "National authorities as well as the private corporations that run them need to work together. This would help to reduce marginalisation and fight radicalisation, which are both for good reason high on the European agenda."

The Heads of all three organisations said they would continue their co-operation to raise awareness about the need to promote mutual respect and understanding between all groups in society and provide support to governments to prevent and combat the dangerous consequences of hate speech.

¹ The United Nations designated 21 March the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1966, in memory of the 69 people killed six years earlier in Sharpeville, South Africa, during a peaceful demonstration to protest the apartheid system.