



Political leaders have central role to play in countering racism and hate crime, say heads of European human rights institutions on International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

WARSAW, STRASBOURG, VIENNA, 21 March 2014 – Political will and leadership are vital to countering racism, discrimination and hate crime, the heads of three intergovernmental human rights institutions said today in a joint statement on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, 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 the opportunities enjoyed by political leaders to shape opinions and set agendas come with a responsibility to unequivocally denounce expressions of racism and combat xenophobia and related intolerance.

The failure to counter racism in an outspoken and effective manner contributes to further marginalisation and vulnerability of the individuals and communities targeted, they said. In addition, it risks giving the perpetrators of racially motivated crimes a sense of impunity.

“When leaders speak out against hate crimes, this sends a strong message of reassurance to affected communities”, said Lenarčič, Director of ODIHR. “Political leaders also play a key role in developing policies to counter hate crime. First, they need to put in place a system for comprehensive reporting and recording of racist incidents, so that policymakers have the information they need to create robust and effective responses.”

The heads of the three institutions said that effective leadership in combating racism had to include co-operation with and support for non-governmental efforts in this direction.

“Civil society organisations’ commitment in this area makes them strong partners for governments – especially in responding to hate speech with counter speech,” said ECRI Chair Ahlund. “Effective co-operation between governments and civil society is also needed to ensure that victims of racist violence are heard and its perpetrators are condemned.”

They stressed that other public figures, such as religious leaders, have an important role to play by speaking out against racist and ethnically motivated violence. The media is also crucial to countering stereotypes and distorted portrayals of groups that frequently find themselves the target of attacks. Openly combating racism is even more essential in times of economic crisis, when these communities are often in greater danger of being stigmatised and scapegoated.

“Racism and hate crime instil fear into entire communities and undermine social cohesion. We cannot allow such fundamental rights violations to persist at their current high levels,” said FRA Director Morten Kjaerum. “Particularly in the run-up to the European Parliamentary elections, political leaders and other opinion makers need to speak out clearly against racist opinions whenever and wherever they are expressed.”

The heads of all three organisations said they would continue their co-operation to raise awareness about racism and its impact, and to provide support to governments to prevent and combat all forms of racial discrimination.

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 against the apartheid system.