Roundtable Meeting on Representation of Muslims in Public Discourse
Warsaw, 9 May 2006

Roundtable Outline

Background

Many OSCE participating States have simultaneously been facing the challenges of managing increasingly diverse multicultural and multi-faith societies. One of the most significant challenges posed to integration and community cohesion in recent years has been the sharp increase in anti-Muslim sentiment, widely observed in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Public discourse – media, political and academic – has shown an increasing tendency to reflect a narrow view of Islam and reinforce pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims. Such discourse has the potential to contribute to a general climate of mistrust, fear and hostility towards Muslim communities in the OSCE region.

At the 13th Ministerial Council meeting held in Ljubljana in December 2005, the Foreign Ministers of the 55 OSCE participating States reaffirmed their commitments to promote tolerance and combat discrimination including against Muslims. In particular, Decision No.10/05, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding emphasized the need to:

- consistently and unequivocally speak out against acts and manifestations of hate, particularly in political discourse and work in favour of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding;
- reject the identification of terrorism and violent extremism with any religion or belief, culture, ethnic group, nationality or race;
- Consider developing, in close co-operation with civil society, concrete measures which do not endanger freedom of information and expression, in order to counter xenophobic stereotypes, intolerance and discrimination in the media and to encourage programmes to educate children and youth about prejudice or bias they may encounter in the media or on the internet;

These commitments have taken on increasing importance in light of recent developments in early 2006.
Objectives

The roundtable meeting on the representation of Muslims in public discourse will explore the various manifestations of intolerance in public discourse; assess the impact of such discourse on Muslim communities and on public perceptions and attitudes, as well as the implications for public policies particularly in relation to migration and integration, counter-terrorism/security measures and multiculturalism.

The event is forward-looking in its approach and will identify ways in which media, political and civil society leaders can be mobilized to counter negative images and help promote a positive portrayal of the diverse multi-faith and multi-cultural groups that make up today’s pluralistic societies. Participants will be encouraged to focus upon the identification of practical policy recommendations and examples of best practices.

Participation

The roundtable will bring together representatives of Muslim communities from the OSCE region, relevant international organizations, media specialists, academics and policy makers. The forum will provide an opportunity for sharing information on good practices by governments, media organizations and civil society. The meeting also aims to facilitate linkages and dialogue between civil society representatives and their respective OSCE participating State delegation.

Organizational Modalities

- One day roundtable event (luncheon provided)
- Four working sessions
- Two speakers and a moderator for each working session. Each speaker will be allowed 10 minutes for his/her presentation. There will be an interactive discussion forum at the end of each session.
- The roundtable will open in Warsaw on Tuesday 9th May 2006, at 9 a.m and close at 6:15 p.m. A reception will be held from 6:30 pm (location tbc).
Programme

Welcome and opening Remarks
- Ambassador Strohal, Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
- Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

Working Session I: Examining Representations of Muslim Communities in Public Discourse
Possible areas of discussion:
- Islamophobia in popular discourse;
- The use of xenophobic arguments in political rhetoric;
- Muslims in the West: Discourse on Migration, Integration and Multiculturalism;
- Discourse on Muslims/Islam in the Context of the War on Terrorism;

Working Session II: Implications of Anti-Muslim Discourse
Possible areas of discussion:
- How anti-Muslim discourse affects Muslim communities;
- Extent of impact on public perceptions and attitudes;
- Implications of discourse on public policies;

Working Session III: Mobilizing the Media as a Positive Agent
Possible areas of discussion:
- How Media shapes our experience and understanding of social diversity
- Improving the way in which Media reports diversity-related issues;
- What Muslim communities/NGOs can do to promote positive images in the media;
- Improving the representation of Muslims in broadcasting;

Working Session IV: Improving the Representation of Muslim Communities in Political Discourse
Possible areas of discussion:
- The role for local political leadership;
- How parliamentarians can contribute to a positive image of minorities;
- How international institutions can help counter discriminatory elements in political discourse;
- Civic Engagement: The promotion of government-Muslim dialogue.

Closing Session