

Council of Europe and the protests in the Islamic world against the film “The innocence of Muslims” (18/09/2012)

A few words about the ongoing protests in the Islamic world against the so called film “The innocence of Muslims”.

The film itself is prejudiced and offending, but even more so, it is amateurish and ridiculous. It should have been dismissed or even better ignored, if it was not for the offence and for the violent reaction it has caused in many parts of the Islamic world.

Our immediate reaction cannot be other than a strong and unequivocal condemnation of that, obviously well orchestrated violence. We also must express our expectation that political and religious leaders in the countries inflamed by the protests will do their utmost to prevent any further violence.

But at the same time we also must look at our part of responsibility to help to de-escalate the current situation and prevent similar developments in future.

I believe the Council of Europe has a very important role to play in this respect.

First of all, one of the key issues which comes up is the question of the freedom of expression. We are the guardian of the European Convention on Human Rights and as such have the responsibility to vigorously defend this essential precondition for the functioning of a democratic society.

This being said, we must also recall that the freedom of expression is not limitless and must be exercised responsibly. The Convention itself allows for it to be restricted, of course subject to very stringent and clearly defined conditions.

Personally, I am very much concerned that the film may be exploited for inciting racial hatred and violence. There is a number of worrying situations, such as the plans for public viewing of the film and anti-Islamic demonstrations in Germany, but also violent non-authorized demonstrations against the film in a number of our member states. It is fully understandable that governments are vigilant and may, in some cases, take action. It is also clear that any such measures must be in line with the Convention and the case-law of the Court.

At the same time, we should respond to perceptions among many people in the world that the freedom of expression is being used and abused by the West to cover up or even propagate anti-Islamic prejudice.

There are, in my view, three priority responses to this.

Firstly, we must do more to explain what the freedom of expression is and why it is so important. We must also make it clear that by defending it we do not automatically endorse any intolerant and offending message that may be allowed to circulate because of the freedom of expression. To the contrary, I think that in situations like the one concerning the film in question, we have the duty to clearly express our indignation as well as empathy with people who feel offended by it.

Secondly, we must do absolutely everything to ensure that the freedom of expression is implemented without any double standards, regardless of the context and specific cultural aspect. Any deviation, even the smallest hint of cultural or religious bias, will be trumpeted up and exploited.

Thirdly, we must do more to fight intolerance, hate-speech and prejudice, including anti-Islamism in our societies. It is, again, all about living together.

You will of course, agree that the Council of Europe has a critically important role to play on all three issues. In this respect, the forthcoming Forum for the Future of Democracy is extremely relevant.

It will provide a very precious and rare opportunity for dialogue on exactly such sensitive issues, with participants representing different views and beliefs. We will be discussing questions such as whether democracy is a universal value, democracy and globalization, media responsibility, religion and democracy, and others.

As for myself I am looking forward to it with great expectations and one hope – that this will be an occasion on which Europe, and the West in general, will not only talk, but also listen.