

**“Council of Europe, National Human Rights Institutions,  
Equality Bodies and Ombudsman Offices  
Promoting Equality and Social Inclusion“  
Helsinki, 10-11 December 2015**

**Session I (10 December)  
Stereotypes and Discrimination – Obstacles to Social Inclusion  
9.30-11.30**

**Discrimination, intolerance and hate speech in political discourse**  
Jonas Gunnarsson, General Rapporteur on the rights of LGBT people, Committee of  
Equality and Non-Discrimination, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe

Dear participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ankara

Beirut

Paris

When we hear the names of these vibrant cities we now think about terrorism and the terrible attacks which targeted young people who were enjoying their youth and freedom. Freedom to go out to a concert, to chat with friends on a terrace, to go out for dinner, to demonstrate for peace.

Their freedom.

In fact, our freedom

While we are still shocked and saddened by these tragic events, we should also try to understand them.

Did they happen because of something we did or did not do?

Did they happen because of increasing discrimination and intolerance in our societies?

Are we responsible in some way?

These attacks oblige us to think about how our societies function and what could be done to prevent such horror. We have a duty to reflect on what made our societies less inclusive and on what can lead to radicalisation.

A duty as citizens and a responsibility as politicians.

I believe we should also be vigilant and ensure that reactions to these demonstrations of hatred do not result in increasing discrimination and hate speech and do not lead to more social exclusion. As an example, following the Paris attacks, there was a rise in the number of anti-Muslim acts in France. Mistrust and intolerance against Muslims were clearly expressed in the media and within the public opinion. These attacks should not be used as a pretext to stigmatise a part of the population because of their religious beliefs.

We should also resist the temptation to undermine freedoms in response to the attacks. Less freedom cannot be an answer to attacks made on freedom.

Dear participants, considering our duty and responsibility to reflect on what is happening today in Europe, I am honored to be with you today in Helsinki to discuss how stereotypes and discrimination are obstacles to social inclusion and what can be done to prevent it. I will try to contribute to the discussion in general and also specifically on the theme “discrimination, intolerance and hate speech in political discourse”. My intention is to highlight the responsibilities of politicians in combating these phenomena.

Hate speech and discrimination targeting specific groups because of their religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, disability, among other reasons, are widespread in Europe. A remark in the street, a comment we hear on the radio or television, an article we read in a newspaper, a post on a social media.

Hate speech is present.

We are all used to hearing or seeing it.

I regularly call on my fellow parliamentarians not to tolerate hate speech and react whenever needed.

But hate speech is also present in political discourse.

Politicians can contribute to exacerbating tensions with hate speech and intolerant discourses.

Some members of mainstream political parties also use racist rhetoric thinking that it might increase the number of voters. Hate speech and the stigmatisation of specific groups can be seen as convenient. Blaming others is easier than reconsidering some policies.

Hate speech in political discourse contributes to widely spreading prejudice and hatred.

It can encourage more hate speech and hate crime and have a multiplying effect considering the potential audience of politicians in the various media. Potential offenders may feel they have received some kind of official authorisation to do so.

I am therefore convinced that parliamentarians and other political leaders hold a special responsibility in preventing and combating racism, hatred and intolerance with resolve.

Allow me to say a few words about our work at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and within the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance to this end.

*[The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination]*

I was invited to participate in this event in several capacities, as General Rapporteur on the rights of the LGBT people of the Parliamentary Assembly and as Second Vice Chairperson of its Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. Our Committee strongly condemns manifestations of discrimination, intolerance and hatred. We use the tools we have at our disposal, which means that we hold hearings, issue statements, present resolutions to the Assembly for adoption. We carry out research and conduct fact-finding visits when needed for our reports, we participate in events and try to contribute to raising awareness on these issues at the European and national levels.

In 2014, I was rapporteur for the report on “A strategy to prevent racism and intolerance in Europe”. In the adopted resolution, the Assembly called on Council of Europe member States to ensure that the legal framework on hate speech and hate crime included the broadest possible range of discriminatory motives, including sex, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, migrant status, sexual orientation and gender identity. The Assembly also called on member States to encourage victims and witnesses to report hate speech and hate crimes to the authorities by circulating information on how to report them and ensuring that reporting can be done on the Internet and in other ways that are easily accessible. It invited national parliaments to adopt codes of conduct for their members including safeguards against hate speech and hate crime, on whatever grounds.

*[Role as General Rapporteur on the rights of LGBT people]*

More specifically now, in my capacity as General Rapporteur on the rights of LGBT people, I have the duty to intervene in the area of the protection and the promotion of the rights of LGBT people, particularly on issues related to discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. I represent the Assembly on these questions in various fora and I am an interlocutor for national authorities at governmental and parliamentary level. My functions as General Rapporteur give me another forum to reiterate our commitment to combating discrimination, intolerance and hate speech in political discourse. I advocate for the right of each person to be free to express his or her identity and call on political leaders to protect this right. In a survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, to which 93,000 LGBT people throughout the EU replied, 36% of respondents said that offensive language by politicians about LGBT people was very widespread and 28% was fairly widespread.

Within the LGBT community, I would like to mention specifically the situation of transgender people in Europe which is of particular concern.

In April 2015, the Assembly adopted a landmark resolution to address their situation. The resolution stated that transgender people were frequently targeted by hate speech, hate crime, bullying and physical and psychological violence. It called for effective criminal and anti-discrimination legislation and stressed the importance of the principle of self-determination of a person. The Assembly also called on member States to enact hate crime legislation which would give specific protection for transgender people

against transphobic crimes and incidents. This resolution aims at providing tools to combat the stigmatisation and discrimination transgender people suffer from. It is a political tool which I try to promote whenever possible.

*[No Hate Parliamentary Alliance]*

In addition to what can be called the regular Assembly work, a specific structure has been set up to reaffirm our commitment to combat racism, intolerance and hate. The No Hate Parliamentary Alliance was launched on 29 January this year in Strasbourg. It is composed of parliamentarians, members of the Parliamentary Assembly, who commit to taking open, firm and pro-active stands against racism, hatred and intolerance on whatever grounds and however they manifest themselves.

As already mentioned, parliamentarians and other political leaders hold a special responsibility in the fight against hate speech, discrimination and intolerance. The Alliance was set up with a view to emphasising this responsibility and providing tools to its members to be more active and reactive at the national level.

Priority themes for the Alliance will be hate speech, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia; anti-Gypsyism and homo – and transphobia for the coming years.

More concretely the Alliance encourages and supports the creation of parliamentary groups on combating racism, hatred and intolerance at the national level. It also promotes 22 July, the day of the Utöya attack, as the European day for victims of hate crime. Thematic seminars will be organised by Alliance members in national

parliaments, on improving public policies with regard to the fight against racism, hatred and intolerance. We are also foreseeing the preparation of a parliamentary toolbox on combating racism, hatred and intolerance, among other activities. This toolbox will provide concrete tools and counter-arguments which will be extremely useful in our fight against hate speech, racism and intolerance. The Alliance is an awareness-raising tool at the political level with a great potential and I look forward to the organisation of events in national parliaments under its impulse.

The Alliance is also a forum of discussion, as an example in January its meeting was dedicated to combating anti-Semitism in Europe. Last June, the Alliance discussed preventing islamophobia and radicalisation. The Alliance is not an isolated structure within the Council of Europe. It is part of the action plan on building inclusive societies to be adopted soon.

*[Cooperation between Parliaments and NHRIs]*

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is quite active in the fight against discrimination, intolerance and hate speech via its Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination and the Alliance. But in order to be as efficient as possible in this fight, we need to cooperate with human rights actors at the national level. I therefore also wanted to say a few words about some specific work we did with regard to cooperation between parliaments and National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). Ms Katherine Zappone, former Committee member from Ireland, prepared a report on “improving cooperation between National Human Rights Institutions and parliaments in addressing equality and non-discrimination issues” back in 2014. In her report, Ms Zappone

stressed that Parliaments and these national institutions both had a key role to play for the protection and realisation of equality, human rights and non-discrimination. She encouraged stronger cooperation for a bigger impact.

In the adopted resolution, the Parliamentary Assembly called on national parliaments to

- develop cooperation channels with national human rights institutions and use their data and reports;
- set up a specific committee for non-discrimination issues;
- seek advice from them when preparing draft legislation and use them as sources of information;
- hold a debate on the annual report of their activities

The Assembly also encouraged National Human Rights Institutions to prepare human rights impact assessments of proposed legislation and provide targeted information and advice to parliaments. Close cooperation is indeed beneficial to parliaments and these institutions and can increase the impact of their actions.

[Conclusion]

Dear participants, I would like to conclude by saying that I am convinced that parliamentarians and politicians can contribute to building a more inclusive society for



all and to combating discrimination, intolerance and hate speech, in the political discourse and beyond.

I welcome the fact that building inclusive societies is now a core objective for the Council of Europe and would like to stress that there can be no inclusive society without human rights and equality. We therefore need to step up our actions to prevent and combat discrimination, intolerance and hate speech at every level. It is high time to translate our political commitment into concrete actions, by putting forward comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation when needed, publicly condemning manifestations of hatred and spreading messages of openness and tolerance for a harmonious and respectful living together in Europe.

As a member of Parliament, I personally feel I have multiple responsibilities in this regard:

- a responsibility to reflect
- a responsibility to ensure coherence in policies
- a responsibility to condemn and react to manifestations of hatred
- a responsibility to promote equality, human rights and social inclusion whenever possible, carrying on a positive message

I am convinced that our joint commitment can lead to results and I look forward to discussing this further with you today.

Thank you for your attention.