

## **Interview with Christian Ahlund**

Chairperson of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

<http://www.humanrightseurope.org/2017/03/podcast-europe-must-remain-united-to-fight-racial-discrimination/>

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**-Christian, today is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. What are your thoughts?**

-We are in difficult times. Things are not getting any better and I think the most important thing now is that the countries of the Council of Europe stick together, work in the same direction. The solidarity between the countries, I think, is the key to success here. For example, one of the really biggest news is the hate speech. Hate speech on the internet. There is no way we can fight hate speech on the internet if we don't have international cooperation.

**-You referred to that in the statement that was released earlier today by the three institutions - the OSCE, the Fundamental Rights Agency and the Council of Europe. You referred to hate speech. For those people who are not following the evolution of hate speech on the Internet identify the problems and, more importantly, the solutions.**

-As you know we have issued the sort of, what we call, the General Policy Recommendation number 15, which spells out possible remedies, how to deal with the difficult issue of the hate speech. And we talked there about the counter-speech is very important. It is very important education to counteract the so called fake news, etc. and as the last resort criminal prosecution. But we are really dealing with an increasingly difficult problem here.

**-What is the cause of this problem? Because you say education is the key. I think most people would accept that. What are the causes?**

-I think this is a combination of factors. One, of course, is the influx of migrants in the countries that are not used to migrants. And the other factor in the deadly cocktail here is the technological development; how easy it is to express very, very aggressive thoughts and ideas on the Internet anonymously and not having to answer for your views and actions. I think the combination here is the very difficult one.

**-You paint a somber picture of the situation regarding racial discrimination in Europe. The President of The United States referred to Sweden in a way that suggested that that was a crisis in our country. You are from that country. In much of the commentary online people point to Malmo they make other very disparaging remarks about what is happening in Sweden. You are from that country. Give us an idea of what is going on.**

-Sweden is experiencing pretty much the same situation as several other countries in Europe. In certain areas we have concentration of people coming from other parts of the world. These people are often disadvantaged as far as work, housing, opportunities in general are concerned. And as in other countries in Europe we see outburst of violent disappointment in those areas. And we've seen the same in France in the suburbs of Paris. We have seen the same some time ago in the UK. What makes the headlines concerning Sweden is that, let's say, for us it's a fairly new phenomenon that creates an interest in the rest of the world.

**-Is there anything specific that happening in Sweden that you would point to us is being positive that we can learn from?**

-Yes. I think even though it's not reflected in recent happenings, the worst is already over. If you look at these places as far as average income, job opportunities etc., actually, we're seeing the positive development. So hopefully things will get better, because I think that is where the remedy lies: to provide better opportunities, better housing, hope for a better life.

**- You mentioned "hope" there. That seems to be very important word. When you look at the extremists' websites the "alt-rights" websites they say that there are key pressures that are drive us for the kind of racial discrimination that you referred to in you your statement. And they say it is due to several things. The first one is the failure of integration. They would say that there are parallel societies (they talked about local areas). They also point to that in Sweden, for example, sexual offence is always used to encourage the fear of the other. But another point that they make is this issue of demography, that in certain countries we're seeing a change of the population. And this is what stocking the anxiety in wide majority populations. How do you respond to that?**

- Well I think by providing better opportunities, better education you can actually influence the demography. People will move out if they get jobs. We can look back, in Sweden we have a good experience with the hundred thousand or so refugees from the Balkans in the nineties. And they present a very positive picture today, where they have reached all kinds of high-level professional jobs in government, in journalism, pretty much everywhere. And when they get jobs, when they get opportunities, they move out from these areas. So, even if we started out on a pretty somber note, but I'm still fairly hopeful that if the politicians assume their responsibility, there are many things that can be done. But the key, if you want to put the headline on it, provide hope for these people.