

High level seminar « Freedom of religion in Europe : achievements and perspectives »

Speech by Nawel Rafik Elmrini (France, SOC), vice-president of the Congress Current Affairs Committee and Thematic Rapporteur on diversity

28 April 2017, Strasbourg

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is with great pleasure that I take the floor in this high level seminar on freedom of religion, migration and education.

As spokesperson on diversity for the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I have been working on the topics we are going to discuss during this seminar.

Two aspects of the European Convention of Human Rights have an impact on how local authorities can approach these issues. Its Article 9 affirms the right to practice religion in public or in private without restrictions. Its Article 8 emphasizes that there can be no interference by the State in private and family life.

We as local authorities have to ensure that our citizens' rights in this respect are upheld. At the same time, we must uphold other essential values such as respect for the rule of law, of gender equality, religious neutrality and non-discrimination. A balance must be struck and our actions, as public authorities closest to the citizens must pave the way for dialogue: intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Recent developments regarding the situation of refugees and migrants have shown us that our democracies are fragile, especially if the political leaders at all levels do not work to protect the rule of law. In Europe today, authoritarian tendencies are part of a wider context, where radicalisation as well as Islamophobic and anti-Semitic hate speech are flourishing. Freedom of religion and integration of migrants are challenged and are constantly being opposed.

As I said, at the Congress, we have been working on the issues of migration, freedom of religion and intercultural dialogue for a long time.

Recently, in March 2017, we adopted a report on refugees and migration, which highlighted the lack of resources for an effective policy for the integration of refugees and the proper management of their arrival. Our report also stressed the difficulties refugees face in the practice of their religions and the restriction on their basic rights, including privacy and education.

In order to promote the construction of inclusive societies and interreligious dialogue, but also the integration of newcomers, the Congress has set up a Toolkit.

Our aim is to encourage the implementation of intercultural and interreligious activities at the local level and to fight against growing radicalization, the rise of violent extremism and sectarian attitudes. On the other hand, the stigmatisation of certain communities, the progression of hate speech on social media and the risk of censorship - and self-censorship - are all dangers that our cities face today.

"The 12 Principles for religious dialogue at local level" which is part of our Toolkit supports religious education and awareness of the various actors, including host societies and newcomers. It promotes a good knowledge of religions aiming to reduce the sense of mistrust and fear that prejudice can cause in the host communities, and proposes to do this particularly through interfaith exchanges or visits to places of worship.

At the same time, in order to enable migrants to understand the social and civic values of the host communities, it reaffirms the essential values of respect for the rule of law, of gender equality, religious neutrality and non-discrimination, and gives local authorities guidelines on how to promote exchanges between migrants and the host society.

I believe that an approach based on what has been called "reasonable accommodation" would help us to create an environment which allows for the broadest expression of religious sentiments to be expressed freely. But this expression must be under the condition that it does not conflict with other fundamental rights that we value. Such an approach can help us build respect for different religious practices in Europe today for all concerned.

Thank you for your attention.