



European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
Commission européenne contre le racisme et l'intolérance

**ECRI's Round Table in Germany
in co-operation with the German Institute for Human Rights**

**12 May 2010
NH Hotel Berlin-Friedrichstrasse 96
10177 BERLIN**

OPENING SPEECH BY NILS MUIZNIEKS, CHAIR OF ECRI

Federal Commissioner Löning,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Participants,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here and welcome you all, on behalf of ECRI (the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance), to this national Round Table in Berlin.

Allow me at the outset of this event to thank the German Institute for Human Rights (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte) hereby represented by its Director, Ms Beate Rudolf. The Institute has provided us with continuous assistance and advice in putting together this event and we are grateful to have benefited from the help of such an expert and efficient partner organisation.

As you know, ECRI's report on Germany was published a year ago in May 2009. Some of its main conclusions will be introduced by Ms Holgersen, ECRI's Rapporteur on Germany, but before we go into the details of the report, I would like to make a few remarks.

We know that according to estimates, nearly one in five persons living in Germany has an immigrant background. Let me however add that the ethnic and religious diversity of societies is a European reality: every single government in Europe has to find a way to grapple with the changing make up of its society. At the same time, this changing reality is generating public fears, often aggravated by the economic crisis. Indeed, times of crisis leads to scare resources and budgetary cuts, which are often affecting disproportionately vulnerable groups. We all know that this is exploited by irresponsible politicians who are exploiting people's fears and take minorities and immigrants as scapegoats. This makes extreme nationalism flourish. Over the 15 past years of monitoring racism and racial discrimination in the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, ECRI observed an accentuation of this trend in many parts of Europe. This is highly worrying but it is not surprising, given Europe's history in the last century.

As Chair of ECRI, I believe that we need to be forward looking and find ways of solving issues. I should emphasize that ECRI's aim is not to point out failures and voice criticism. We are not here to "blame and shame". Germany has taken some important measures in recent years: it adopted a General Equal Treatment Act (AGG) and set up a

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Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency. A National Plan on Integration has been implemented for the last two years and an institutional dialogue with the Muslim community has been established through the German Islam Conference. On the other hand, we know that certain parties with open racist and revisionist platforms have gained ground in recent years, that victims of discrimination are still insufficiently aware of their rights and that discrimination persists in many areas of life for the Muslim, Turkish, Black and Sinti/Roma communities.

As Chancellor Merkel recently emphasized, we want “people who live among us over several generations to integrate into this country”. This is surely one the key challenges ahead. The questions that remain however are: how can this be achieved, maintaining a balance between the preservation of one’s identity while ensuring the cohesiveness of society? How to promote the learning of the State language as a means of integration while avoiding any counter-productive stigmatisation effects on those whose mother tongue is not German? What are the responsibilities of the majority to promote integration?

In its report, ECRI made a number of recommendations on how to move forward on these issues: I see this event as a unique opportunity for the authorities to discuss them, renew their commitment and take further action, together with civil society, to combat racial discrimination and promote integration. ECRI Round Tables offers a critical review of the situation and to send strong messages out. They also aim at promotion dialogue and translate words into action.

Let me conclude by saying that we all know that fighting racial discrimination, racism and other forms of intolerance is not something that can be done through remote control from Strasbourg, Brussels or from any other distant location. The real work is to be carried out at the domestic level, by you, and in many cases at the regional or local level. This is why we are very pleased that representatives of the Federal ministries but also from the Länder have joined us today. Together with the large number of non-governmental organisations and representatives of civil society present today, I trust that we will have a frank, open and constructive discussion.

Thank you.