



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



Round Table

“Combating racial discrimination and intolerance in the Slovak Republic” organised by

the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

and

the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (SNCHR)

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Austria Trend Hotel Bratislava (Vysoká 2A, 811 06 Bratislava)

Conclusions by Christian Åhlund, ECRI's Chair

First of all, let me say how impressed I am by the energetic and dynamic discussions here today and by your readiness “to put problems on the table”, which is already a way to start solving them.

As far as concrete steps for the future are concerned, based what we have heard today I will express a few ideas.

Firstly, it appears from today’s discussion that the “mother” of all problems is the lack of an efficient institutional frame-work empowered to deal with racism and discrimination, as well as with human rights in a broader term. Instead there is under the coordination of the Ministry of Justice a complex structure which does not seem to facilitate decision making and problem solving. Until this question will find a solution, formalism, lack of political will and lack of ownership will continue to affect the impact of policies against racism and intolerance in the Republic of Slovakia.

Secondly, I will concentrate on Roma, whose situation is obviously of very serious concern. For solutions to have a long-term effect particular attention should be paid to the problems affecting their integration, in particular of Roma children. I was pleased to hear that the current situation of disproportionate numbers of Roma pupils in special schools is being addressed. Closely related to this is ECRI’s recommendation to make pre-school readily available for all children, including Roma children. This would help to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma pupils and give Roma children a fair start in life.

I understand that following the 2015 EU Commission infringement procedure against your Country concerning discrimination of Roma children in education, actions have been planned to integrate more Roma children into mainstream inclusive education. We really hope that this action plan will bear fruit despite the fact that a number of local authorities are not committed to changes. It is obviously very important to strengthen these authorities’ awareness and capacity to deal with Roma issue

There are some good examples of Roma integration, which were reported today such as in the village of Spissky Hrhov where unemployment among the Roma is far below the average for Roma, no children are sent to separate schools and even three Roma residents are in college.

Thirdly, this morning we have also heard how to make better use of the anti-discrimination law, which recently has been amended in line with ECRI's recommendations, as reported by Ms Kolíková, State Secretary at the Ministry of Justice in her opening remarks.

However, the real problem is the lack of its implementation. In this context, I would like to emphasise the urgent need to finalise as soon as possible the reform of the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (SNCHR) in order to strengthen its independence and capacity. The reform of the Centre should take into consideration ECRI's and other International Organisations' recommendations. Unfortunately, we heard that lack of funds and budgetary independence are problems affecting also the National Ombudsperson.

It is clear that one of the difficulties in the effective implementation of the law is the lack of case-law which could guide its interpretation. We think that an increased ability of the Centre to litigate could help develop case-law on discrimination. It is clear that the lack of proper functioning of the Centre has a significant impact on the effective application of the anti-discrimination law.

Further steps need to be taken to offer training to judges and lawyers on what constitutes discrimination and on how to handle such cases. Similarly, also the general public need to be informed better about the anti-discrimination law and its use in protecting individuals' rights.

Fourthly, we discussed at length the problem of hate speech which unfortunately has become common language in political discourse. Refugee crises, the Internet development and social media are common features of the European continent, with evident repercussions on the increase of hate speech. We heard today, as in other round tables, that newspaper s' chats are forced to close night time when cyber haters are most active. We also heard about ECRI General Policy Recommendation No.15 on combating Hate Speech, which contains useful guidelines on how to prevent and counter the use of hate speech. I am glad to learn that on the occasion of this event these set of recommendations have been translated also into Slovak.

To conclude, I believe that your Country shares a number of common problems with the neighbouring Countries. At the same time, among the so called Visegrad Four the Slovak Republic stands out for its commitment to the proper functioning of the EU and the support to its institutions. But in this context, it should be remembered that the EU is not only about shared technical standards and various forms of economic cooperation. Above all, the European Union is based on shared humanitarian values and a culture of human rights. And for a country to be a genuine member of the EU it requires the political will to support and share EU's humanitarian values and to provide a legal framework and sufficient resources to manifest and implement that political will.

Authorities should therefore see ECRI's recommendations not as a criticism but rather a help to realise those goals.

On behalf of the ECRI delegation, I would like to thank the panellists, the Government representatives and the SNCHR who greatly helped organise this event, as well as all the other participants including NGO representatives, for today's frank and open discussions.