

The International Muslim Communities Congress (IMMC) – Abu Dhabi, 8/9 May 2018

“The role of local authorities in integrating religious minorities and in promoting inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and activities”

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and pleasure to be here today and to share with this distinguished audience experiences, views and proposals for inclusive societies, for inter-religious dialogue and for living together in respect, dignity and peace.

I would like to begin by expressing my thanks and appreciation to His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of State for Tolerance, and the International Muslim Minorities Organising Committee – notably Dr Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi and Dr Mohamed Bechari - for creating this opportunity for participants from around the world to contribute to a common reflection on the values of dialogue, understanding and mutual benefit among different religious and cultural components of our societies.

It is an honour to represent here the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Our Congress, part of the Council of Europe, brings together mayors and councillors of some 200 000 local and regional governments in 47 European States. Local elected representatives are the public authorities closest to citizens and they are responsible and capable to promote an inclusive culture and climate, where people with different or without religious beliefs live and meet, share work and leisure time and practice their respective traditions.

It is in cities, towns and municipalities, where different communities can experience and adapt their perceptions of each other. And it is at the local level where good practice can be used to spark good practice elsewhere. No theoretical concept can be as convincing as good practice at local level.

Therefore it is indispensable that national governments and religious leaders work together with local governments and I am very grateful to Dr Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, chairman of this conference, for having pointed this out when announcing the event.

[Education for citizenship: Young people at the centre of action]

Please let me refer to one dimension which must not be forgotten when devising activities in order to better include Muslim minorities: it is the average age of Muslim populations in a given country and the specific needs of and opportunities for them.

The Muslim population is much younger in age when compared to the average in Europe: according to 2016 statistics, the average age of the Muslim population in Europe was around 30¹ years while the average age in these countries was around 43 years. The high ratio of young people among the Muslim minorities provides a great opportunity for spreading out democratic values, participation and pluralism, a sense of justice and also of belonging, and qualities like acceptance and mutual respect. And as – in some countries - many young Muslims question their own identity – sometimes living between the social traditions of the country of origin of their parents and grand-parents (via satellite TV or internet programmes) and the pluralist and diverse reality of their country of residence and citizenship – this matter of identity and self-esteem and their place in society have to be addressed.

No community and its leaders can afford losing the young generation, not taking them along as active residents and citizens who contribute their share in building an inclusive society in which they have found their active and satisfying role and place.

[No “one size fits all” approach]

Speaking on behalf of the Congress, a body reflecting 47 different realities in our member states, I would like to endorse that the traditions and the solutions to be found have to be different – however based on the same values of respect, pluralism and dignity. There is no “one size fits all” approach possible.

European pluralistic democratic states are built on a shared democratic culture: a set of attitudes and behaviours that emphasise the separation of state and religion and the principle of the rule of law and human rights, which practice dialogue and cooperation, European states are used to solving conflicts by peaceful means, promote active participation in public space and grant the protection of minorities. We cannot imagine inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue to work without a democratic culture.

The Council of Europe has identified the reinforcement of democracy in schools as a fundamental source in the development of open and inclusive societies and for acquiring democratic values through education in the early life of a person. We call this the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture and it is being rolled out in most of our 47 member states and included in the national curricula.

Through education for democratic citizenship, young Muslims as all other young people have the opportunity to become citizens who will preserve and shape democracy and an inclusive and pluralistic society in the future. This will also provide favourable ground for overcoming exclusion, frustration and, in the worst cases, violence and radicalisation that some Muslims are going through and which has such a negative impact on perceptions.

How can, in our view, local political and religious leaders achieve living together in diversity, peace and respect?

I will mention here three steps in the right direction:

Firstly, by enabling minorities in their daily social life to be fully active and participating members of the society they live in: economically, socially, culturally and politically. Living together means interacting, participating, exchanging and not segregating. Beyond an open attitude language skills is a key element to enable this inclusion.

Secondly, by ensuring the conditions in which minorities can practice their religion, traditions and cultural heritage without fear.

¹ In 2016, 50% of European Muslims are under the age of 30. Source: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/29/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>

The role of municipalities and cities, of their elected politicians and the administrative services under their authority, is primordial in getting this right. Local governments are the ones who deliver services in education, health, housing, transport and provide public space to meet and practice traditions and sports. They are the ones who work together with the Muslim and other religious communities, their associations, citizen initiatives or NGOs to open up communication channels. And most importantly, they are the ones who, as local political leaders, will set an example.

Thirdly, encourage the members of a minority group to actually make use of the opportunities offered and provided.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Political leaders – national governments, local governments – and religious leaders as well as civil society and academia need to encourage and practice mutual understanding, dialogue and participation, in order to get to know each other and work and live together.

National governments can use their international fora like the United Nations, the Arab League or the Council of Europe to develop and share good practice. But all these projects will only bear fruit if they prove to work at the local level; if it works in the municipalities, where people actually live day by day. At the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, we are convinced that the interaction with other co-citizens and residents is a crucial part for the success in the creation of a safe, inclusive, diverse and peaceful society. It is the local level which holds the key to successful integration.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is committed to its role of promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between religious communities at the local and regional level. The Congress, and the hundreds and thousands of mayors and councillors it represents, are ready to share good practices and to learn from failure. Because nothing is as convincing as a good example presented by a mayor, who implemented it.

If there is a wish for co-operation and exchange in the framework of a structure of dialogue to be established after this ground breaking conference, the Congress of Local and regional Authorities of the Council of Europe will seriously look into this. Let me start the co-operation today with a small gift: A book published by the Congress called “Gods in the city – Inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue at local level” and the Congress Toolkit for organising inter-cultural and inter-religious activities.

I will share the results of this important event with our different partners in the Council of Europe and I see opportunities that can contribute to achieve our common objective: Living together in respect, dignity and peace – for the benefit of the minorities and of the majorities!

References:

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Toolkit for local authorities when organising interreligious and intercultural activities.²

Council of Europe, Action Plan on Building Inclusive Societies (2016-2019), is working on empowering those who are marginalised, and in supporting effective integration policies.³

CoE project “Competences for democratic culture: living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies”.⁴

² Source: <http://www.congress-intercultural.eu/en/>

³ Source: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805c1a1f

⁴ Source : <https://rm.coe.int/16806ccc07> and <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/about-the-project-competences-for-democratic-culture-and-intercultural-dialogue>