

RENC(2015)3

Council of Europe 2015 Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue (Sarajevo, 2-3 November 2015)

Discussion note

Background

1. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has established the Exchanges in order to promote mutual respect and understanding within European societies. The Exchanges provide a platform for open and transparent dialogue on various societal issues relating to this matter, having regard to the fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law between the representatives of public authorities and representatives of the religions traditionally present in Europe, the representatives of non-religious convictions, and other players in civil society.
2. During the Exchanges, participants have the opportunity to share their different perspectives on these issues, taking as a starting point their common adherence and commitment to the fundamental values of the Council of Europe.
3. The Exchanges are organised under the responsibility of the Committee of Ministers and prepared by its relevant Rapporteur Groups (Rapporteur Group on Education, Culture, Sport, Youth and Environment (GR-C) and Rapporteur Group on Human Rights (GR-H)), in co-ordination with the Directorate General of Democracy. The eighth edition of the Exchanges will be organised in Sarajevo on 2 and 3 November 2015 in the framework of the Chairmanship of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Theme and context

4. The 2015 Exchange will deal with the role of religions and non-religious beliefs in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism, with the theme of: "Building inclusive societies together". This theme links into the [Action Plan against Violent Extremism and Radicalisation leading to Terrorism](#) adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 19 May 2015.
5. The subject of "Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse and Democratic Societies" is an important aspect of the Action Plan, and the Exchange is more specifically relevant to the Action Plan's sub-chapters of "Building inclusive societies" (item 2.1.2) and "Providing a counter-narrative to the misuse of religion" (item 2.1.3).
6. More explicitly, specific reference is made in the Action Plan to initiatives to "counteract the destructive messages of extremists with counter narratives. This will include raising the profile of and providing a platform for religious leaders and academics who speak with authority about how the activities of terrorist organisations are in conflict with religion. In addition, students and community leaders will be encouraged to emphasise how terrorist groups such as ISIL, also known as Daesh, are harming people of the Muslim faith and causing damage to wider society. The testimonies of victims of terrorism will be taken into account in this context". Recent instances of violence in the name of religion have re-confirmed the need to combat religious extremism through counter narratives capable of reaching wide audiences.
7. The Action Plan also indicates that the Council of Europe Annual Exchange on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue will be adapted to provide a forum for discussions on issues relating to preventing radicalisation.

8. The **two sub-themes** of the 2015 Exchange are:

- the role and place of religion in the public space;
- teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs at school.

9. Both are introduced below, with suggestions of relevant issues that may be debated. The list of issues is indicative and is not intended to limit the discussions.

The role and place of religion in the public space

10. The question of the role and place of religion in the public space is approached in very different ways across the member States of the Council of Europe. Each approach is rooted in a particular historical, cultural, social and political context and each national experience can be a source of inspiration in developing a common pan-European approach on the issue of building inclusive societies. The Exchanges are an opportunity for a reflection – with representatives of different religions and non-religious beliefs in society – on ways in which the different models may contribute to the fight against radicalisation and extremism.

11. It is useful to bear in mind as a starting point the guarantees concerning freedom of religion and religious expression as laid down in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and its related case law.¹ In this connection, it is also relevant to refer to the [Compilation of Council of Europe standards relating to the principles of freedom of thought, conscience and religion and links to other human rights](#) recently finalised and issued.

12. Addressing the question of the role and position of religion in the public space requires debate and reflection on issues such as:

- How to balance respect for religious and non-religious beliefs with the conception of the place of religion in the public space inherent to each European society?
- How can religious communities and representatives of non-religious convictions contribute to enhancing democratic citizenship? What is the relationship between religious freedom and building inclusive societies?
- How can public authorities and religious leaders work together to fight against radicalisation that may lead to terrorism and to develop a mutually-acceptable and coherent stand, which can be heard by the different components of society?

Teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs at school

13. As regards the issue of teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs in the school setting, the respective roles and responsibilities of the family, the State and society, including religious communities, has been much debated. Our contemporary societies have defined balances and limits that are reflected in legislation. The European Convention on Human Rights deals with this principle in Article 2 of its First Protocol.² However, the Court's case law has acknowledged a wide margin of interpretation for States in this respect.

¹ "1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

² "Article 2

Right to education

No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

14. The Council of Europe has significant experience in developing policies and tools to promote the contribution of education in supporting democratic citizenship and intercultural diversity within societies. This includes a wide-ranging reflection on how to live and learn together in religious and convictional diversity. Relevant texts include [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2008\)12](#) of the Committee of Ministers on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education and the [Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue](#), as well as the report of the Group of Eminent Personalities “[Living Together: Combining diversity and freedom in 21st-century Europe](#)”. As part of its Action Plan against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism, the Organisation is giving priority to finalising and testing a competences framework for democratic culture which will provide a practical tool for use in schools and educative settings in all European countries as well as to the wide dissemination of the publication “[Signposts- Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education](#)”.

15. Questions to be debated include:

- Should specific curricula be developed, or is it more appropriate, or valuable, to ensure that education on religious beliefs is present across a number of disciplines (language, literature, art, history, geography, etc.)? How can this be achieved?
- Beyond formal education, should other initiatives be taken to promote better understanding and appreciation of religious and convictional diversity among the general public? Which ones?
- In what ways can education about religions and religious beliefs be a vector for tolerance and intercultural dialogue?

16. Both of the above sub-themes will be debated in plenary sessions and briefly introduced by keynote speakers. The aim of the Exchange is to promote open and interactive dialogue between participants who will therefore be asked to keep their oral interventions as brief and focused as possible and to avoid reading out written statements prepared in advance. However, those participants who so wish, can of course make available written contributions to the other participants, either during the meeting or by sending them to the Secretariat beforehand.

Conclusions

17. The Exchanges are a forum for dialogue between the Committee of Ministers and representatives of religions, of non-religious convictions and other actors of civil society. The meetings do not adopt formal statements or declarations. However, it is suggested that a set of conclusions may be issued under the responsibility of the Chair(s), which may draw attention, where appropriate, to proposals for operational follow-up that could be integrated into the work of the Council of Europe as an added value.