



COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

COMMISSAIRE AUX
DROITS DE L'HOMME



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

CommDH/Speech(2019)10

ECRI's 25th anniversary event

Session 1 - "Reality check after 25 years: are we winning or losing the struggle for equality?"
"What have we achieved, where are the lacunae, and which good practices can we highlight?"

Speech by Dunja Mijatović

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Paris, 26 September 2019

Twenty-five years ago, today, Sarajevo, my hometown was about to suffer its 905th day of siege that lasted 1425 days, the longest of a capital city in the history of modern warfare.... A town that only 10 years earlier had hosted the Olympic games and had been portrayed as a model of peaceful coexistence was being savagely destroyed with bombs powered by ethnic and religious hatred. The brutality of the war in the former Yugoslavia was no stranger to the Heads of State and Government who met in the first Council of Europe Summit in Vienna in 1993. That war represented a cautionary tale amid the enthusiasm that the fall of the Iron Curtain had created in Europe. Unification seemed to be winning over divisions. But the war and atrocities happening in the former Yugoslavia were a stark reminder that the destructive powers of intolerance and racism were still alive – and they were destroying human lives.

Today our European family is bigger, freer and more democratic. We have built institutions and drafted legislation to combat those destructive powers. But the struggle for equality is far from over. On the contrary: the very serious concerns that prompted the Heads of State and Government to pave the way for the establishment of ECRI are remarkably similar to those we have today. Aggressive nationalism, ethnocentrism, economic difficulties and an unfair distribution of efforts to protect refugees are eroding social cohesion and fostering tensions and xenophobia today as they were 25 years ago.

ECRI's work has helped to lay a solid legal and institutional foundation to help combat racism, xenophobia and intolerance. We should recognise the advances that its work has brought to our society. At the same time, we must acknowledge that this progress did not benefit everyone in the same way. There remain great discrepancies from country to country as well as within any single country.

Laws remain a scrap of paper if they are not fully implemented. Worse, they can be adjusted to match political calculations rather than the public good. Therefore, the challenge today is to ensure that the laws and standards are implemented and the institutions that we created actually function. And these challenges are political more than institutional.

If political leaders themselves ignore anti-discrimination laws and the values and principles that gave birth to them, we will not make progress. Regrettably, during my work in the past year, I have observed that several governments and parliaments are departing from agreed standards and are withdrawing into

dangerous nationalistic ideas. They are going down a nationalistic route, not only in words, but also in deeds. As we meet today, the toxic, irresponsible and cynical nationalistic discourse that some political leaders hold in Europe is undercutting social cohesion and the fragile fabric of our democracies. This is a very dangerous path that fosters increasingly intolerant attitudes and attempts to pit parts of society against one another, and to scapegoat various social groups, minorities, or professions. This is often accompanied by weakening democratic institutions, limiting civil society freedoms, and divisive language designed to stigmatise the “Other”. The most affected by this situation are those who have always been the preferred targets of demagogues: Jews, Muslims, Roma, foreigners and LGBTI people. I see a continuity between past and contemporary hate, racism and extremism. Practices such as chasing Roma out of their homes, marginalising persons with disability, assaulting LGBTI people, ethnic profiling and hate speech are all reminiscent of dark periods of Europe’s history.

Over the past two decades, ECRI’s reports have consistently warned against rising extremism, racism and intolerance in Europe. By now we should have learned that dehumanising the Other only paves the way to further violence and threatens society’s well-being. Yet, we still have a lot of work to do. Today’s event is an important occasion to reaffirm that racism is an enemy of human rights and that ECRI represents a crucial institution to protect human dignity. Today’s event must also be the start of a renewed commitment to confront the deeply-rooted prejudices, stereotypes and myths that still oppress the lives of too many human beings in Europe.

ECRI stems from the vision, sensitivity and humanity of some giants of our common European history. Their times were not easier than ours. Our task is not bigger than theirs. It is now our turn to give renewed impetus to the ambition of establishing a “democratic and pluralist society respecting the equal dignity of all human beings”.