

## **Communicating equality, diversity and anti-racism**

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Dear friends and colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be among ECRI and its friends, if only virtually. As a consultant one year ago, I recommended that ECRI devote a seminar with equality bodies to communication and that it cooperate with the Fundamental Rights Agency, which has convened many brain-stormings on the topic. I am very pleased to see this recommendation come to life. In the programme, I am attributed many hats: former chair of ECRI, former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and current director of the Europe regional office at Amnesty International. I will try to juggle these hats and invoke examples from each role in answering the questions posed in the programme.

Why are communications important? In human rights work our arsenal to change the world is composed primarily of words and images in reports, in media materials, in litigation. Such was the case when I was in ECRI as well as when I was Commissioner. In Amnesty I discovered that we have “people power” as well, which can be harnessed in campaigns that use not only words and images, but actions – demonstrations, petitions, street theatre, etc. As a global movement, Amnesty can mobilize people not only in one country, but globally.

How can we effectively communicate the equality and diversity message? I can think of several examples of what has worked well in my professional experience. From my time at ECRI, two examples outside of country reports stick in mind. The first was ECRI's extraordinary statement on Russia's discrimination campaign against Georgians in 2006; the second was a statement on France's deportations of Roma in 2010. In both of these cases, the timing of ECRI's communication was key, the issue was urgent, the governments needed to be called out, and the media picked up the message very well.

As Commissioner for Human Rights, we did good communications work in Greece regarding the Nazi movement Golden Dawn in 2013. At the time, the government, law enforcement, civil society, and the media were at a loss as to how to deal with racist violence. The visit was timely, and at the end, I did 17 straight interviews with the media, which were thirsting for a way forward. My basic message was based on ECRI's work – a government is entitled to ban a racist, anti-democratic party. My

message was later amplified when the leader of Golden Dawn was filmed at a party meeting asking “Who the f... is Muižnieks?!”

Another example that comes to mind was our work in Hungary, where the government had orchestrated a massive anti-migrant campaign. The government was not open to a dialogue, so I decided to try to raise the political cost of their course of action. I did this by publishing a hard-hitting opinion editorial in *The New York Times* detailing Hungary’s institutionalized xenophobia, outlining Hungary’s duty to refugees, and invoking the experience of Hungarians themselves who had sought protection outside their country after the crushing of the 1956 revolution. The piece hit home with the government, which did not change its policy, but reacted strongly, by calling me “hateful and ignorant.”

At Amnesty International, I have identified several successful examples of communicating the equality and diversity message. I highly recommend Amnesty Poland’s five minute video “Look beyond borders” in which individual Poles are paired up with refugees, and they sit silently looking into each other’s eyes. The video is incredibly emotional, powerful, and humane. I saw it and wept even before joining Amnesty.

I recently learned that Amnesty International in Italy has a task force of 250 activists who are engaged in social media. They started by monitoring digital communications during elections and referring instances of hate speech to prosecutors. But they continued after the elections by entering discussions on issues such as migration, asking questions when lies or falsehoods were posted, pointing to research and data, and breaking down monolithic discussions. They also rally to provide digital support to human rights defenders, NGOs, and journalists when they are attacked by digital mobs. If there were such digital human rights brigades in each county we could move mountains!

What are our target audiences? The three main purposes of communications are to sustain support for human rights, including for equality and non-discrimination, to influence change leaders and to raise awareness among rights holders. Most of the time we focus on the “persuadables” to sustain support for human rights and target change leaders. In the piece for ECRI a year ago, I suggested that we need to devote much more attention to raising awareness among rights holders. Why? Surveys suggest that most victims are not aware of remedies, the existence of equality bodies and support organizations, so laws against discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes tend to remain on paper.

How do we frame our messages? We have to be careful that the images and language we use do not trigger responses that might strengthen the forces working against human rights. We cannot talk about “them” – migrants, minorities, Roma, LGBTI persons as opposed to “Us”. We need to talk about how we are entitled to rights and what happens when some of us are deprived of our rights.

Amnesty International in Australia has done some interesting work on refugees. They found that images are incredibly influential, as they provide a snapshot of a situation, they linger in one's mind and shape emotional attitudes, including compassion. Research found that close-up portraits of refugees with clearly recognizable facial features evoke compassion, but images of groups, for example crowded boats, create emotional distance. The Australian government systematically tried to dehumanise refugees through images and language.

Amnesty has an ongoing campaign against criminalization of solidarity with migrants in Europe. Sometimes activists make mistakes and use hashtags such as "solidarity is not a crime" or "rescue is not a crime" which reinforce negative frames. The same holds true with using names of human rights defenders and terms such as "smuggler" or "terrorism" in the same sentence. Such juxtapositions only reinforce the narrative of criminalization. Instead, Amnesty suggests using the hashtag #freetohelp to defend the freedom of individuals and groups to help others, to talk about solidarity, empathy, that helping is the right thing to do, that it is *normal* to want to help others in need.

What does story-telling mean? Amnesty regularly hones in on individual cases to make a broader point. It often does so through videos and other actions. For example, Amnesty organised a campaign from 2017-19 regarding Taibeh Abassi, a young Afghani woman in Norway who was threatened with deportation to Afghanistan. She had been born in Iran, and had never lived in Afghanistan. She speaks excellent Norwegian and English. Amnesty posted YouTube videos of her telling her story, then asking Norwegians on the street "Would you go to Afghanistan?" All of them said "no," it was too dangerous. Amnesty also posted videos of demonstrations and solidarity actions, showing how Taibeh had made many friends and supporters throughout her community. In the end, the government tried to deport her, but Afghanistan would not take her in, so she was allowed to stay in Norway.

I will stop there. To conclude, we need to continually innovate, to know our audience, to go more and more digital, more and more visual. We cannot let the opponents of equality and diversity have the upper hand in communications, we cannot let digital thugs monopolize discussions and discredit human rights defenders and journalists. We need to fight back, to use the science. We need to do more than just react, but to anticipate and think strategically.

Thanks for your attention!