



**Civil Society Preparatory Meeting for the
OSCE High Level Conference on Combating
Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and
Understanding**

Bucharest, 6 June 2007

Closing Session

**Closing Remarks by Ambassador Christian Strohal
Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and
Human Rights**

Check against delivery!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the end of this intense day, I can say that our expectations have been fulfilled. I have been impressed yet again by the commitment and the expertise civil society brings into the debates. I am convinced that this kind of meeting is needed to put forward the voices of a strong, compassionate and articulate civil society. I can assure you that the OSCE institutions, including my office, will look carefully into the recommendations you are finalizing today. I will take to the participating States my wish that these recommendations should support the ongoing dialogue with civil society.

It is probably too early to draw conclusions from this meeting, but allow me to make some observations before Ms. Margareta Matache, Executive Director of the Romani CRISS presents the recommendations that will be introduced at the opening of the Conference tomorrow.

First observation: there are still worrying trends related to hate crimes and hate motivated incidents including continued acts of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia and intolerance against Muslims, Christians and Roma, Sinti and Travellers. The need for increased attention and efforts in addressing other groups who are with certain regularity attacked or discriminated against, including gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons and also persons with disabilities was also highlighted during the discussions. Furthermore, violations of freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association are still widely spread throughout the OSCE region. We also have to note that although some progress has been made, the commitments made by participating States to intensify their efforts to combat hate crime through

strengthened legislation, data collection and law enforcement response are far from being implemented.

The challenge we face is the spread of intolerant public discourse throughout the OSCE region. In this regard, I can assure you that my office will further assist States in their efforts to promote respectful discourse in the public arena while respecting freedom of speech.

Second observation: You have made it clear that we have a shared responsibility in overcoming challenges. I am thinking about the difficulties faced by civil society in some parts of the OSCE region and especially the attacks on human rights defenders. The gravity of the situation requires a concerted action between States, International Organizations and civil society. Please be assured that I will remind States of their responsibility for implementing commitments to promote and protect human rights, and those related to mutual respect and understanding.

Third and last observation: The role of civil society is more important than ever. The OSCE has a longstanding tradition of openness towards civil society through meetings and conferences where State and civil society representatives are on an equal footing. The OSCE institutions have also woven close links with civil society, especially for the design and the implementation of projects. The benefits drawn from our strong relationships with NGOs and individuals throughout the OSCE region are invaluable. However, as you have underlined, there are ways to strengthen the co-operation between civil society and the OSCE. I will only mention a few suggestions I found particularly remarkable from today's session, relating to the OSCE and its participating States.

First and foremost, participating States should implement the commitments they have undertaken in relation to supporting civil society and those they have made to monitor and combat hate crimes; participating States should engage in a genuine partnership with civil society and draw on expertise available within civil society. Further, we have received recommendations pertaining to the need to create official means and channels of communication with civil society on national and local levels.

Today's sessions also recommended that the three Personal Representatives of the Chairman-in-Office play an active role in increasing awareness about hate-motivated violence in the OSCE region. Participants have urged the OSCE to facilitate and support civil society participation in OSCE events and other platforms to address participating States. In this regard, the ODIHR should create a forum for dialogue for discussions on issues relating to human rights and the human dimension. In turn, civil society should proactively identify areas in which it can cooperate with government and explore areas of mutual benefit.

I thank you all – the keynote speaker, participants, introducers, moderators, rapporteurs - for your input and for carrying messages forward. I would like to thank our Romanian hosts for their support in organizing this event. I would like to extend my sincere thanks also to the Spanish Chairmanship team, both in Madrid and in Vienna. I would like to also thank the Conference Services of the OSCE in Vienna, the interpreters, and my staff, especially the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Programme who have made this meeting successful. Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Mr. Nicolae Paun, deputy of the Parliament of Romania and President of the Committee for Human Rights, Beliefs and Issues of the National Minorities, for making a supplementary room available for the working groups and for hosting the reception that will be opened at the end of the meeting.

I wish you much success in your continued efforts to combat intolerance and promote mutual respect and understanding. My office looks forward to a continued partnership with you in supporting the implementation of the recommendations made here today. Let me end by encouraging you to make your voices heard during the conference over the next couple of days and to ensure that the recommendations from this meeting are mainstreamed into each of the plenary sessions.

Thank you.